A Lancer Science Fantasy Original

THE SORCERER'S SKULL

Lord Owen crosses the gates of hell to return the sorcerer's talisman to its place of birth!

DAVID MASON

author of *Kavin's World*

Directly overhead, a strange darkness seemed to grow, in answer to Khitai's cry to his gods. Owen shivered, and held close to his ax, while the scum of the crew huddled together in their fright. Several white flakes drifted down, and then white fog moved in to hide them from the raider corsair.

"Now," said Owen. "Quiet, all of you, and hope the raider passes."

Magnified by the quiet and the fog, the creak of beating oars came to their ears; then suddenly there was silence.

Owen cursed, calling on his ancient gods, and stripped himself of his mail. Then, holding tight to his ax, he climbed the rail and dropped into the cold gray water. . . .

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I

The sorcerer Myrdin Velis, smiling quietly, closed the great wooden shutters over the windows of his tower workroom. At his wordless gesture, his apprentice Simon lit the squat candles in their black iron sconces, and the room filled with their yellow light. The sorcerer sat down in an intricately carved chair, before the round green jade table; he pointed to a chair opposite, and the apprentice drew it close to the table, and sat down. The sorcerer folded his long pale hands in an odd gesture, touching his fingertips to his chin, and stared at Simon silently.

Myrdin Velis was, to ordinary eyes, a young man, hardly more than a boy, beardless and pale. However, when one looked into the eyes of Myrdin Velis, the illusion of youth began to disappear. Those eyes were green, and old.

And after one had looked into his eyes, Myrdin Velis did not seem so much a young man as he did an unbelievably old one who was somehow wearing an incongruously young mask. The eyes looked out, and the eyes had seen a great deal too much; the smile on the young face did not match the ancient, grim humor in the eyes.

Simon, lean-faced and black-bearded, was the only one of Myrdin's many apprentices who had survived through the twisted bypaths of wisdom that the sorcerer trod. Some had died, in odd ways. Some had not died, and of these, one or two undoubtedly would have preferred death to their present conditon. It might be both educational and gainful to serve Myrdin Velis, but it was not safe.

"All of this." Myrdin Velis spoke softly, his eyes on Simon's white face. "My tools, and the wisdom to use them. My gold, and my power, and even this seal that I wear . . ." His pale hands touched a lump of silver hung on a chain around his neck. "Even this, which you may be wise enough to use—or even wiser, wise enough not to use—all of this, except my house, shall be yours."

"I thank you, master," Simon said. He did not ask what Myrdin Velis meant. He waited. That was Simon's way.

"Not yet, but soon," Myrdin Velis said, meditatively. "I will return to the place I came from, as soon as one more thing is done. You cannot do it. Only one man can . . . one man can take . . . a certain thing to the place it must go . . . and then I will have finished with . . . all this."

His left hand moved in a gesture; the black stone on a ring winked in the candlelight, and then the candles suddenly went out. The green jade table glowed brightly in the darkness, and Myrdin bent over it.

"Look, Simon."

A flickering, smoky image grew visible deep in the green stone, shifting and moving at Myrdin's control. There were faint sounds, far away; the clatter of horses on a stony path, the clink of metal. Simon, peering, could see indistinct treetops, a distant edge of mountain, and a narrow, rutted road among pines. There were two horsemen, riding fast, their horses lathered with exertion; the

horseman riding second kept glancing back over his shoulder.

Now Simon could see a little better; the first rider's face seemed framed in the green glow. He was a strong-looking man, with a square-cut red beard, a sun-leathered face, not young, but not yet old. He was wearing a curious steel cap, ringed with black fur, and leather garments studded with metal under a gray, torn cloak. Dimly, Simon could make out his odd weapons: a small round shield with an animal crudely painted on it and a crescent-bladed ax, which he held in his hand.

The other man was less clearly visible. He seemed short, round-faced and fat, and he too carried some sort of weapon, like a bow but not quite a bow, ready in his hand.

They were men in flight, obviously; but their pursuer, whoever he was, was invisible.

"His name is Owen of Marrdale," Myrdin said. "He is many things. He has been a scholar of sorts, and a writer of second-rate rhymes—you see there is a larra-harp at his saddle. And his head contains many foolish things, like most men. He could have been lord of his own lands once, if he had not held by some of those foolish things. He has served several lords since, and he is very skilled in the favorite game of these menfolk—war." Myrdin laughed quietly. "But just now, his profession is that of thief."

"Who follows them?" Simon asked.

"The late owners of the stolen property they carry," Myrdin said. "They are very persistent owners, and they will not give up easily. There was something Owen's friend, there behind him, desired greatly. Do you see that round man there with the yellow skin? His name is Khitai, and he is, in a small way, my colleague."

"He practices the art?" Simon asked.

"In a small, small way, as I have said," Myrdin answered.

"For example, he can, with great effort, cause rain for his tribe's thirsty cattle. Or create lust in horses or women . . . read the lines in a hand, curdle milk, or confer boils on an enemy. But he's an earnest student, Khitai. Alas, he is an exile now because of the earnestness of his studies. And now, he possesses some moldy parchments, which he fondly hopes will teach him a great deal more, if he can only read them. And there are some assorted golden trinkets and jewels, in their saddlebags, stolen at the same time."

"Pursued so hard, for a few jewels?" Simon asked coldly. He had long ago learned how to make jewels.

"Oh, if that were all . . ." Myrdin chuckled. "No, that loot simply happened to be available. It was in the box with the fragments of the lost library of Shtaina."

"Ah." Simon breathed sharply.

"Yes. The few pages left, saved from a great fire long ago. Part one and another book, bits and pieces . . . and worth much, very much, to any who can read them. Can you read them, Simon?"

Simon nodded silently.

"You shall. The papers are worthless to Khitai. He can read only a few words of that tongue. His great risk, and the risk to which he exposed his friend, was worthless. Now, he will die, and Owen of Marrdale too—unless I aid them."

"Why?"

"A service for a service. It is the law," Myrdin said. "Only I can save these two fools . . . and they shall serve me, in return."

"The follower comes," Simon said.

Far away, something black, huge, and unpleasant was visible through a break in the trees. Whatever it was, it seemed to be following the ancient road, moving steadily after the riders. Evidently, a wind blew its scent toward

the horses, who tossed their heads wildly and blew in terror, as Owen and Khitai drew up, turning in the road.

Their voices came through, distant but clear.

"It's coming too fast," Owen said harshly. "No . . . use . . . trying . . . to outrun it." He was breathing hard. Khitai's face was set in terror; his left hand made odd gestures, but the weapon was firm in his right. Owen swung the crescent ax, spinning it, and settled the round shield on his wrist. The horses, terrified, pawed and shuddered.

In the pines, on the road behind, the dark thing seemed to pause and hunch itself, as if sniffing. It emitted a strange mewing wail, and suddenly hurtled forward toward the two waiting men.

"Now," said Myrdin, moving his hand, "I shall begin."

But the black, formless shape was already almost on top of the men; towering up and taller than horse and man together, it seemed to claw smokily at Owen's head. His shield swung up, and the crescent ax spun, slicing at the blackness. The thing screamed again, as Khitai, vainly trying to control his horse, aimed his weapon, a kind of crossbow. It twanged, and an iron triangle thudded into the black shape.

"Well," Myrdin said, and his hands wove a quick pattern. In the green lighted image in the table, a bright spark suddenly appeared, a pinpoint sun against the darkness of the beast. It was as if a tiny flame were caught in a mass of tangled black vegetation. The rearing thing did not seem to notice for a second; its huge clawed limbs slashed again toward the riders.

Then the flame spread, to the size of a hand and larger, so bright that even in the image it was too bright to look at. The dark monster squalled again, but this time the sound was different, a wild howl of anguish. It had time for only a single shriek; the bright fire erupted up into a flashing column, and went out again. Then the thing was

gone. There was an even thin layer of black ash on the road, and something thin and white among the sooty remnants. That was all.

Owen, calming his terrified horse, had his hands full for a moment. Khitai had been thrown, and was gathering himself up, brushing dust from his garments, and grinning.

"We have a friend somewhere, I think," Khitai called to Owen.

Owen climbed down from the saddle and stood staring down into the film of black ash on the road.

"Who would have thought the thing was so . . . so inflammable?" he said, rubbing his chin with the back of his hand. "And what set it alight, anyway?"

Khitai had come up beside him. The round-faced little man bent down and picked up one of the bones. He studied it carefully.

"That was a hound," Khitai said. "I told you. We have a friend somewhere. Possibly a god who lives in these forests favors us. Usually . . ." He ceased speaking, and shuddered slightly.

"Usually, none escapes such a hound as this." Owen completed the sentence for him. "So you hinted to me, a while back, when we were crawling about under that devil's house. For a few minutes, just now, I was thinking you were right for once. By the Mother, that's a hunting dog to send after a couple of unfortunate thieves, considering it was my first venture into the art of robbery."

"They . . . the Keepers, back there . . ." Khitai spoke thoughtfully. "They make these creatures in a special way. They use part of a man in its making. Usually another thief. Look."

He held up the bone, unmistakably human, and yellow with age.

"That explains its rancor against us," Owen said. "Professional jealousy. Have they more of these to set on our trail?"

"I do not know," Khitai replied. "But we'd best move on."

Myrdin Velis lifted his eyes from the jade table and smiled at Simon.

"Now I shall send my image to these travelers and inform them of my reasons for aiding them," he said. "Guard my body for a moment, good Simon." The sorcerer closed his eyes and leaned back in his chair.

A moment later, a shape appeared in the jade table's image, and quickly solidified; Myrdin Velis seemed to stand on the road, his hands folded, watching the two men.

Khitai turned and saw him first. His slanted black eyes flickered quickly to the silver seal around Myrdin's neck, to the ring on his hand. Then the small man dropped to his knees, bending his head downward, arms out. He cried out, in his own language, a harshly guttural sentence.

Owen turned quickly, and saw the sorcerer. He stood still, watchfully, the crescent ax hanging loosely in his hand.

"Greeting, Owen of Marrdale," Myrdin said. "And you, my colleague Khitai, greeting also. You may rise."

"Thank you, lord," Khitai said, and got up reluctantly. His expression showed clearly that he would have liked to retreat but dared not.

"I am Myrdin Velis," the sorcerer said. "I sent fire to the hound which pursued you, and thus saved your lives."

"Many thanks, friend warlock," Owen said. "And now, by the usual rules of commerce between men and magicians, you'll want to be paid, right?"

Myrdin laughed, a cool sound.

"That is true," he said. "However, I am not quite the usual sort of magician. I do not demand your service as

payment, certainly not for so small a thing as this. I'm sure you could have defeated the hound without my small aid."

"Indeed I could have," Owen said, grinning. "Sliced it to bits in another minute or two. And then again, maybe not."

"Friend Owen, please . . ." Khitai said in a harsh whisper. "Don't jest with him. He is . . ."

"Only a fellow worker in the arts magical," Myrdin said.

"Well, thanks again," Owen said. "Now, as to payment. We've a few gauds and baubles in our saddlebags, lately the property of some ascetics who call themselves Keepers. They had no women about, and precious little use for jewelry, so we relieved them of the stuff. If you'd care to look it over . . ."

Myrdin lifted a hand. "No, no. I am myself, somewhat ascetic. I need no gold. But is that all you . . . ah, relieved the Keepers of?"

"A few papers . . ." Owen began, and Khitai moaned aloud.

"I shall not force you to give the parchments to me," Myrdin said. "Merely promise that I may have them if you cannot use them. Is it a bargain, small sorcerer?"

"If I cannot—" Khitai looked up suspiciously. "You will blind me by magic, and take that as the meaning of your bargain."

"No. I shall not prevent you from making an attempt to read them. I promise that," Myrdin told him.

"Done, then," Khitai said. "Yours, as soon as I try and fail. Mine, if I can read them."

"And well done." Myrdin said. "A fair price for one life. And for yours—Owen of Marrdale, will you do me a small service?"

"Name it. If I have the power . . ."

"Not only the power, but you will gain something for yourself by this service," Myrdin said. "First, I desire you

to undertake a small journey for me, to deliver something to its proper place."

"You've my word." Owen said. "I'll do it."

"Owen, Owen . . . he'll trick you," Khitai whispered insistently. But Owen merely grinned broadly.

"Secondly, I will do two things more for you, above this small thing concerning the hound," Myrdin said. "I will blind the Keepers to your footsteps, so that they may not send anything more dreadful after you. Something, such as they prepare even now, much worse than the hound . . ."

Khitai grew pale under his yellow skin.

"I will do one thing, more." Myrdin paused, staring at Owen. "You have eaten the substance that your small friend here knows how to prepare, the ghafta plant."

"Yes, I have," Owen said, his grin fading. "And damned to the day I touched it."

"I warned you against the dream food," Khitai said. "I told you it was not for mere pleasure, or curiosity . . ."

"And I ate it, anyway," Owen said. "I've no blame for you. It was my own doing."

"You ate the ghafta, and you saw another place, another life," Myrdin said. "You remembered lost things, vainly. This is my second gift. I can show you where that place is, which you saw then. I can send you to the white gate with the carved sea-otter over it."

Owen stared at the sorcerer, his eyes narrowed.

"That was a dream," Owen said, coldly. "If it were real, the things in it happened an age ago. The gate is dust now. And all the rest . . . dust. Don't mock dreams, magician."

"I do not mock," Myrdin said. "That place you dreamed of, the matters which trouble you still . . . all of it was real. The gate still stands, and the city behind it."

Suddenly Owen laughed and tossed the crescent ax up, catching it lightly.

"I still think you're mocking me, warlock," he said. "Or you're playing at mysteries, as your kind love to do. But

the first offer has a value. Take the monster makers off our trail, and take our service in return; never mind the second matter at all, look you. I'll undertake any small journey you'd wish, in return. I'm a masterless man at the moment, and open to offers like this. Will you come with me, Khitai?"

"I must," Khitai said, tonelessly.

"Then it's done," Owen said. "Where'll you have us go, lord of magic?"

"Come to me at my house, in the city called Mazain, in five days." Myrdin Velis suddenly became transparent. He stood, smiling and fading until there was nothing left of him but a faint flicker—and then out, like a candle.

"Fry my liver!" Owen said, staring at the empty air.

Khitai made a hasty gesture, to ward off evil, and spoke in a hushed voice.

"He could do that, too, friend. May the gods protect us."

II

"Our vanishing acquaintance seems to have kept his word," Owen said, as the two rode along the broad highway toward the city of Mazain. The morning sun was warm on their backs, the road was full of travelers, even at so early an hour; and the bag of gold clinked cheerily at Owen's knee.

"Not a sign of pursuers," Khitai agreed. But his round face was serious. He pulled thoughtfully at his thin black mustache and stared ahead.

"I see walls down there. And I smell the sea," Khitai said.

"It's the sea, yes," Owen said. He threw back his head and sniffed. "Ah, it's a good smell, too. But the whiff of smoke in it, now . . . that's Mazain. You can see the walls, and some of the roof tops. The biggest city of men in the world, it is. Not the finest, nor the cleanest, but the biggest. Men swarm in it by the hundred thousand, like ants."

"So many," Khitai said wonderingly.

"Men of all kinds, come for money, or come to see the sights, or to trade. Mazain sits on the narrow sea, between the north and the south, and all the world's traffic passes

here. They say if you wait in the principal square long enough, everyone you know will pass by at least once."

"There will be wise men, no doubt," Khitai said.

"Our odd acquaintance, Myrdin, certainly."

Khitai rolled his eyes. "I meant some lesser mage. All I require is one with some knowledge of old tongues. This book . . ."

"That book," Owen said, wryly, "that bundle of parchment rags that almost cost us both our precious skins. That moldy pile of dim scribblings, not fit for arsewipes. You'll burn out your eyeballs trying to find out what the ancients had to say, and by the Great Mother, you'll find the stuff is a batch of love poems, or a cookbook, or whatever." He laughed.

Khitai shrugged. "The pursuit of wisdom, for its own sweet sake, friend Owen; it's not in you to see that. And also, I am not a great wizard like . . . like that one who spoke with us. I desire to add to my store."

"I wish I knew what I desired, Khitai," Owen said, staring ahead. "There. The Western Gate . . . you can see it now."

A great block of rose-colored stone, pierced by a barrel-arched gateway, and topped by climbing steps of scarlet-tiled roofs. On either side, squat black basalt images of forgotten kings guarded the Western Gate of Mazain. Under the arch, carts and horsemen and foot travelers, passing in and out, were dwarfed by the worn black giants on each side. Beside the gate, magnificently cloaked and armored, wearing expressions of infinite boredom, lolled half a dozed guardsmen.

As Owen and Khitai rode under the great arch, an especially elegant young officer held up a lazy hand, and the two riders pulled up.

"Merchants?" the officer inquired.

Owen decided to save explanations, and merely nodded.

He was already searching his belt-wallet for suitable coinage.

The elegant one received a silver coin, did not even trouble to bite it, and waved the two men on with a yawn. Owen and Khitai guided their mounts through the crowded entry and into the square just beyond, where Owen pulled up again, looking about.

"It's been a while since I came here," he said doubtfully. "A long while. I was a younger, big-eyed about it all, and the city seemed twice the size it does now. There was an inn hereabout . . . ah, up that wee street."

"It doesn't look big enough to fit a horse through," Khitai said, reining his mount in. They rode into the alley-like street, dark with high houses on all sides. Around a turn, they came upon a small square, bounded on one side by a high wall, on another by a smoke-dark tangle of stories one atop the other; a weathered wooden board bore an almost invisible painting depicting a large bird.

The square, and a big innyard beyond, were both filled with busy life. Stalls were surrounded by people anxious to buy; tethered horses and mules, and one or two odd animals that neither Owen nor Khitai could name, lined the wall side, while people milled about. Near the inn, a cluster of brightly painted wagons were grouped around a small fire; and under their wheels, there were running and tumbling children. Dark women in bright clothes moved amid the wagons.

"Rom-folk," Owen said, nodding toward the wagons. "Tinkers and thieves, but I've always liked them."

Khitai nodded. "I have never seen them before, but I've heard of them. A very ancient tribe . . ." He stopped, thoughtfully.

"Their language is very old. I wonder . . ."

"One of them might help you with your translating," Owen said. "Might also steal your back teeth and tell you

a pack of fantastical lies, too. Few of them can read any tongue, though they can speak in a good many."

The two men dismounted, and led their horses toward a stable gate. Grooms appeared, and Owen handed over his reins.

"Mind you don't founder these two," he said to the grooms, who grinned and bobbed thanks for the coins he flung them.

"There'll be another one or two of those if you handle those beasts rightly," Owen said, taking his gear from the saddle. He swung the black crescent ax meaningfully and added, "and there'll be something else if you don't."

Khitai said nothing, but his slanted eyes flicked at the groom who had his horse, and the fellow grinned nervously.

"Now then, we'll see mine host, and arrange for beds for tonight, and breakfast for now," Owen said, leading the way. "And then we'll have at the business of the day."

An hour later, they emerged again, details concluded. Owen belched, grinning, and Khitai chuckled.

"First proper breakfast I've had in a year," Owen said. "Town life may agree with me."

"You've got a journey to make, for that one," Khitai said, darkly.

"Maybe," Owen said, carelessly. "If the task's to my liking . . ."

Khitai shrugged.

Owen carried the sack, heavy with ancient loot. He looped carelessly over one arm, as if it were only a bag of bread and cheese, of no value. There were sharp-eyed thieves in Mazain, none of them ethical enough to mind stealing stolen goods again.

Khitai carried his own bag, odorous of moldy parchment, clutched close to his chest. Any thief, seeing the two men, would have tried for Khitai's treasure first.

"We could speak to the Rom-folk, if you've a mind to,"

Owen said, staring from the inn door toward the clustered wagons. A Rom girl, seeing the red-beard, smiled toward him with a dazzling flash of white teeth in her dark face. Owen returned the look she gave, and chuckled.

"There might be none of your kind of learning to be found among those carts," he said to Khitai, "but I think I might add a bit to my own store of wisdom."

They strolled down, into the circled cluster of painted wagons, glancing around them. Naked children ran between their feet, a sound of piping music wailed from one of the carts, and on the step of another, the Rom girl flashed another smile, and disappeared inside with a flick of bare ankles.

"Would the lords wish something here?"

Another Rom girl; this one a tall beauty, with black curls, bright gold flashing in her earlobes, in a flame red-dress covered with odd golden embroideries. Her smile was not as welcoming as the other's had been; it was a cat-like smile, and her eyes were veiled.

She was leaning against the side of an especially bright caravan. Her long pale hands were studded with heavy rings; the stones flickered in the sun, as she idly tossed something from one hand to the other. Owen could not decide what it was she played with; it seemed to be a small white stone. He smiled at her, and spoke.

"We're no lords, lady. Only a traveling scholar, my friend Khitai here, and myself, a man of less learning . . . Owen of Marrdale, I'm called."

"And what would a traveling scholar and a man of arms be after among us Rom?" the girl asked in her low, lazy voice. "We've no learning, and we avoid wars."

Owen's smile was broader. "Now, *kawlo jura, e lachipen, fay. Ma kay Rom, lilengro as, nay?*"

Her black eyebrows arched, in surprise, instantly controlled, and her smile grew more openly mocking.

"So, you have the tongue, red man, but that does not

make you a Rom or a brother to Rom," she answered in the same language. "And we are still poor folk, as I told you. What do you want here?"

"I've heard that there are old people among the Rom, sometimes, who know many languages," Owen said in fluent Rom speech. "You're a traveled folk, and your carts go everywhere. We've got an old book, and we wish to know what it says."

"An old book?" Her eyes glittered. "A secret of treasure, perhaps?"

"I doubt it," Owen said. "Maybe nothing of importance, except to my scholar friend here."

"Oh." She stared at Khitai, and then, abruptly, switched back to the common speech. "Say no more in Rom, *gahjo*. You speak it badly, and it hurts my ears. Yellow man, let me see your hand."

Obediently, Khitai put out his hand, and she stared at the palm for a moment.

"Ah," she said, nodding. "Good fortune, *chick prala*. I think you will have what you want, and enough time to enjoy it. And a long, long journey, too . . . you, redbeard, let me see yours. The left hand, so." She bent over it, and this time her expression changed oddly. She studied it for a long time.

"I think you too will have good fortune," she said. "But it depends on what you call good. There's much there. Losing and gaining and losing again . . . oh, very much, and long life too. But I looked for a reason. I wished to see if I should help you, and I see that I must." She released Owen's hand, with a strange, stiff smile. "The hand of a thief, too."

Owen shrugged. "Your own people often say that a man must live as he must," he told her. "A little stealing . . . well, we all have faults, look you."

She laughed at him. "And a smooth talker, too. Well, *baro*, I do know an old woman of this tribe who has many

old languages. She says she's my own great-grandmother, though I wonder about that. I'll take you to her."

She moved with sinuous grace across the space between the carts, and Owen and Khitai fell in beside her. Owen saw that the running children swerved aside rather than cross her path, and the other folk in the camp watched with oddly respectful looks as the woman came through.

"You are the queen here," Owen commented.

She nodded. "Yes, clever *baro*. I am Zelza." She gave her name as if it were a title.

"But my folk are poor, and we are not many," she added, as they came to another painted cart. Her eyes slid sideways toward Owen. "We have no king, anymore. Only me . . ."

She rapped on the door of the cart. A high, ancient, voice snapped angrily from within, and Zelza replied. There was a crackling exchange in the Rom language, and then the door opened.

The woman who glared at them from the doorway could easily have been a great-grandmother, or even a great-great-grandmother. She looked like a withered winter apple, brown, wrinkled, and very dry, but her eyes were bright as a girl's and her back straight. She even had a few teeth, which she showed in what might have been either a smile or a snarl.

"Waking up an old woman who needs her sleep. Want to show me books, yes, I'll guess what you want, you trollop," the old lady crackled at Zelza. "Not enough Rom men for you, eh, widow? Flattering a *gahjo*, just for his fancy red-beard, ho. What's this silly book you spoke of?"

Khitai bowed to the old lady; among his folk, age demanded much respect.

"Honored old person, I am Khitai, a poor scholar. I have this . . ." He opened the bag, and drew out the crumbling roll of parchment. "A very old book, as you see. I had hopes of finding someone who might know the

way to read it. By good fortune, your carts were camped in our very path."

The old lady giggled at him, evidently pleased with his tone and manner. She took the papers from him, and Zelza opened a small window in the caravan side, letting light in to read by.

The old woman spread the papers on a small bunk, and sat down, turning them over and staring at them through squinted eyes. Zelza, Owen and Khitai stood silently in the dimness, Owen's head bent under the low roof, Khitai tense as a drawn bowstring.

"I have seen this kind of writing," the old lady said at last, and Khitai's breath hissed, "But . . . the words are in a very old language, almost forgotten. I cannot tell you much; I can only read a word here and there, words like the ones in other tongues . . . look, here is the word for sea, repeated several times. It may mean people who live on the sea. Another word is the old word for metal-working, and there are words for salt and mercury. It may be a book about magic, or a book of recipes for a jeweler. Ah . . . here there are verses. And something that seems to be an ancient king's name. Pieces of several books, I think."

Khitai nodded, his face expressionless. "I am grateful, honored one, though I had hoped to know more . . . but most grateful, for your help. If there is any way I may show gratitude . . ."

The old lady cackled disdainfully. "I've been no help at all. I can see you're a good lad, and a bright one. Bit of a warlock, eh? Might be able to help you a little there, though men don't do magic near as well as we do. But I've been no help on this. Know somebody who might be, though. A high wizard, lives in this city. Friend of the King's, I've heard; all the great ones afraid of him, ask him for this and that . . . very old, very wicked . . . almost as old and wicked as me. Myrdin's his name."

Khitai and Owen exchanged glances, and Khitai shrugged.

"Honored one," he said gently, "We have already become acquainted with Myrdin Velis . . . in a way. We have an appointment with him tomorrow."

"Eh?" She looked at him. "Oho! Been making bargains with that one, eh? Be careful. He's a tricky one. He'll have you stuffed in his private collection of talking dead men, maybe, or he might have use for your liver in a magic soup. You watch out for him, boy. You and your red-beard friend, here."

Zelza broke in. "I looked into their hands, grandmother."

"And you saw something for clever Zelza, did you?"

Zelza smiled her slow smile. "I was sure you'd give them a gift, for my sake, clever grandmother." She stared at Owen. "Since their lines are tied to mine, I think."

"Makes up her mind quick, doesn't she?" the old woman said mysteriously. She bent down, scrabbled under the bunk, and drew out a leather sack in which she dug for a moment. She pulled out a smaller sack, and sniffed it thoughtfully.

"Still as fresh as the day I picked it," she muttered. "Growing between his white ribs, it was, and he'd be older than me, now, and it's still sweet-smelling, it is . . . here, red-beard, tuck this away." She tossed him the little bag, which seemed to contain a pinch of dried herb. "If you're ever in serious trouble with the great one, Myrdin Velis—and you're bound to be, sooner or later—just remember, that's something he doesn't like. And that's all I can do for you today."

Her voice suddenly seemed to change, to an old woman's whining, wheedling cant. "Maybe you've a bit of silver, eh? A small coin, just one, but silver . . . it's necessary, you know, and every bit of money helps an old woman keep herself alive a bit longer . . . ah, thank you, *baro*,

thank you . . . and would you let me go back to my napping, now, lads?"

She ushered them out, and the door of the caravan snapped shut, as the three of them stood outside in the bright sun. Owen sniffed the little herb-charm again. An odd, pleasant scent, mintlike, came from it; he slid it into his shirt, and laughed.

"Well, Khitai, it seems that only our odd friend Myrdin can read the thing. So, I'll guess he'll be getting it. At least, we've still got our gold to sell."

"I had hoped . . ." Khitai said, half to himself. Zelza looked at Owen.

"Gold?" she said, cocking her head.

"Oh, just a few old pieces," Owen said lightly. "We'll find the street of the jewelers, and get rid of the metal. We will need coins—there's a mort of things I'd like to spend a coin or two on. A new cloak, for one, and maybe a bit of gambling and such, while we're here in a city like this."

"Shall I come with you, to see you're not cheated?" Zelza asked innocently. Owen roared with laughter.

"And you'll try to dukker us out of it, wouldn't you, lass?" he said, through his mirth. "Come now, don't wear that look of hurt innocence. I know the Rom-folk, and their fondness for coin. There's no wrong about trying to do that, but I'm going to keep this loot, just for a while."

"You'd buy a bit of land with it, wouldn't you, *baro?*" Zelza said, in a low, edged voice.

"Maybe. Why not?"

"Red-beards. All of you red folk, all the same," she said, lifting a shoulder. "You'd want to tie yourselves to a patch of dirt, live on parsnips, and fertilize the ground with your corpse after awhile. Farmers, all of you. We Rom . . . we're free. We own all the world . . . and more than one world, *gahjo*. We own everything because we own nothing." Zelza's eyes were brilliant, holding Owen's.

"I can make you my king, red-beard," she said, slowly. "King of a small tribe . . . that's nothing. King of . . . me. That's more than you know about, man. You need no land, Owen of Marrdale. Be Owen of the Rom. To be a poor Rom is better than to be a king of *gahjo* folk . . . and you'll be a king of Rom."

For a long moment, Owen stood, caught by the black fire of Zelza's eyes; his breath came faster. With an effort, he controlled himself, and smiled.

"Oh, it's a grand offer, lady. But . . ."

"But?" Zelza stared at him, and now she looked serpentine.

"But we've made a promise, to a magician," he said. "That same Myrdin Velis. He did us a great good turn, and all he's asked for it is a little of our time, which we'll give him."

"Not just our time, Owen," Khitai said mournfully. "He also takes the books."

"The books . . . well." Owen spread his hands out. "Too bad, but maybe you'll find others . . . something in a readable language, eh? But we did say we'd do his little job of work, did we not?"

Zelza's glittering eyes were still on Owen's face. Slowly, her clawed hands relaxed, and she sighed.

"Very well," she said. "But afterward . . ."

"Oh, afterward, time to talk of other things," Owen assured her. "Now, about the jeweler's shops . . . where would they be?"

"Come," she said, and swung away, in a Rom's long pacing step, into the narrow streets of the city.

Later, much later, the three emerged from a dark shop in the street of Goldsmiths. It had been a long, difficult bargaining, even with Zelza's expert haggling to help. The goldworker had been the richest and most important of his guild, and had still been amazed at the value of the loot.

He had also been more than a little suspicious of its origin; pieces so old were rarely seen.

But, at long last, bargains had been struck: first, a small bag of current gold and silver coin, and second, a wooden tablet, stamped with the goldsmith's seal. The tablet bound the goldsmith to return a fair percentage of the value of the odd jewels and the rest of the metal when he had finished selling it or remaking it. Zelza, suspicious, had at first tried to get him to hand over the full amount, but it was a huge price, even with the goldsmith's clever bargaining-down. Zelza did not trust city-folk ways, but she yielded at last; the goldsmith called in a witness, signed the wooden tablet with his own seal and that of his guild, and took an unbreakable oath before a very ancient god.

"Now you're a rich lord indeed," Zelza said, as they came out into the street. "A few trinkets, you said . . . who did you rob, red-beard?"

"Better not to ask," said Khitai, in a low voice.

"There's enough for a fine piece of shore land, in the coasts of Meryon Dales . . ." Owen said thoughtfully.

"Land!" Zelza snapped.

"Tomorrow, we go to Myrdin Velis, Owen," Khitai said. "We may need no more land after that. Maybe only a man's length of dirt will do us. I'm afraid of that one."

"So am I, indeed," Owen replied. "But a bargain's a bargain. We must see what he wants, anyway. Meanwhile, we've a pocket full of metal, and I've a thirst, first for a drop of drink, then to see the great city and what sins it's got in it."

"I already know enough about this city," Zelza said darkly. "Possibly too much. There's wine in my caravan, Owen."

"Ah, but I'm a dalesman of Meryon, lady," Owen answered. "We're noted for our poking noses, going to see the sights of the world, here and there. And I've never

seen this city properly—I was only a child the last time I was here. There are doubtless sights a child wouldn't appreciate."

Khitai sighed. He saw the wild look in Owen's eyes, and once again he regretted the day he had let his friend taste of the sacred plant. He needed no magical insight to guess that Owen's thirst was for the momentary peace he could have, drunk and forgetful. Owen wanted to be free of the dream the ghafta plant had brought, and Khitai knew that could not be.

"I need no strange sights," Khitai said. "And this city does not please me. I was not born to live among houses."

"Neither was I," said Zelza. "Come back to the caravan with us, Owen."

"Go," Owen said. "I'll come back later. You, Khitai, you may try to read your ancient book, while I go sightseeing. And Zelza may read your fortune again, perhaps." He grinned. "I'll return, have no fear. I wouldn't want to miss our appointment tomorrow."

III

Khitai had ordered candles brought in the room in the inn, after darkness came down on the city. He had spread out the ancient book on a wooden table, and locked the door; he had lighted the candles, and an incense burner which gave out a strange, sharp scent. And he had closed the shutters. With his ragged cloak pulled around him, Khitai hunched over the table, slowly studying each of the dim, twisted letters of the old book His yellow face was expressionless, but his hands trembled sometimes as he turned a page.

Down in the innyard, a fire leaped high in the Rom camp, and music rose, penetrating even through the high, shuttered window of Khitai's room. The Rom-folk performed strange tricks for visitors who wandered into the camp, both city folk and travelers of many kinds. Robed and solemn men of the western land of Puruth, and tall, nearly naked, brown-skinned men from the Sea Islands, wearing feathered cloaks, men of the city, fat merchants, elegant nobles, artisans and apprentices, thieves and cutpurses—all of those and more wandered in and out of the Rom circle. And most of them left with lighter purses, one way or another. Some had their fortunes told, and

some watched the juggler, or the dancers, or applauded the Rom who led a fat bear through a heavy-footed pavane. Most who watched flung coins, and for those who did not, light-fingered Rom girls managed to collect a price anyway.

Watching it all silently from her caravan door, Zelza stood and waited.

And up in the shuttered room, Khitai murmured, and sometimes scribbled a word or two on a tablet, and turned the leaves of his book.

The moon was low in the sky, and the night life of the city began to ebb at last. There were fewer people wandering about the Rom camp now. Khitai, in his room, leaned back in his chair, watching the candles guttering low in their holders. He sighed deeply,-and slowly slid the ancient book back into the bag which had held it. Then he rose, and blew out all but one candle, and opened the shutters. Far below, he could make out the Rom carts, and leaning against one of them, a still figure: Zelza.

Khitai went out of the room and down through the narrow corridors and twisting stairs of the inn, out into the yard. He walked slowly, his head bent, one hand fingering his amulet.

Zelza heard him approach, and turned to face him. In the firelit dark, her eyes gleamed greenly.

"Your mad friend will return soon," Zelza said. It was not a question.

"No madder than I," Khitai said. "But I think he will. Unless he's had a knife slipped into his ribs in some dive."

"No," Zelza said.

"I suppose you would know," Khitai said. "I know of your kind of seeing, lady. The women of my folk have it, too, but only for one man for each."

"It is the same with us," Zelza said, with an edge in her voice. "One man for whom we can see. No matter

how many other lovers, husbands, what would you . . . but only one for that."

Khitai nodded. After a moment, he said, "He'll be drunken."

"I know that too."

"For this, blame me, lady," Khitai said. "Once, not too long ago, I caused him to see what he should not have seen. Now sometimes, old ghosts sing in his ear."

"Tell me something about him," Zelza said. "How did you meet? Where *is* his own land, this place called Meryon Dales?"

"We met in a far land, far east of here," Khitai said slowly. "I was alone, having been driven out by my own folk . . . for a reason, lady. He was also alone, but he had a thing of great value, which he shared with me."

"What?"

Khitai smiled thinly. "Water, lady. This was in what men call the Empty Lands, where a water bag can be worth more than a sack of emeralds. So we became brothers. As for his own land, I have never seen it, but he speaks of it at times. It is a land of mountains, with many small valleys; it is on the coast, maybe a hundred leagues to the south of here. I think he is like most of his folk who live there. It would seem they have red hair, like his . . . a thing counted unlucky among my people. They sing, much, and lie a great deal, and no three of them can gather together without either fighting or boasting. They have neither wealth nor power, but they can make excellent rhymes."

"He would make a good Rom," Zelza said.

"I do not think so, lady," Khitai said. "For one thing, he is a dalesman, and can neither serve nor rule. For another, I think he loves a ghost, and has lost his taste for mortal women."

Zelza stared at him thoughtfully.

Somewhere, in the dark street that led away from the square, a voice came distantly, singing. The singer was not entirely certain of his tune at times, but the volume was more than enough to fill the narrow street. Somewhere, a shutter clanged open, and a hearty curse accompanied by a splashing sound. The song ceased. A moment later, a figure appeared at the edge of the camp, and came toward the firelight, moving uncertainly.

"My friend," Owen mumbled, peering at Khitai. "Goo' morrow, lil' wizard. How . . . how went your . . . book-reading?"

"Badly," Khitai said. "How went your sightseeing?"

Owen chuckled blurrily. "Well enough. A good deal to drink . . . lucky, didn't carry weapon. Seems against the law, carry . . . weapons. Sailor . . . down there by docks . . . lost temper about . . . silly little dancing girl, something like that. Tried to stick me . . . city guard took him off, put him in prison for carrying big knife. . . ." Owen chuckled, and held up his hand in the firelight, examining the bruised back of it and the long cut in his forearm. "They'll prob'ly fine him, 'less he has a broken neck. Pretty good evening, all told."

"I see that," Khitai said, smiling slightly.

Zelza said, "I've a salve for that cut, red-beard, if . . ."

Owen stared at her, as if seeing her for the first time. He shook his head, slowly, and stepped back.

"Thanks, goo' lady . . . but . . . I need nothing. I heal quickly. I need nothing . . . only . . . a little more wine. Khitai, no matter how much I drink, those ghosts are . . . still there." He shook his head again. "Khitai, Khitai . . . I must . . . go back there. I must . . . try that damn' plant of yours again. To see, again . . ."

Khitai shook his head. "No, friend Owen. The ghafta takes a man back in dreams, but once only to each of his former lives. That one is lost, for always."

"The warlock," Owen muttered, "that damn warlock. He promised I might see that place . . . but I hear the bells, sometimes . . . Rom queen, is there a jar or two of wine in that painted palace on wheels?"

"Come in, then." Zelza, turned and went up the step into the caravan. Inside, a lamp flamed up, yellow light spilling from the open door. Owen, stepping with great care, made his way up into the cart after her, tripped over the step, and fell inward with a thumping crash.

"Uh." His voice came from inside. "Sorry, m'lady. Now . . . 'bout that wine . . ."

Zelza appeared at the doorway, silhouetted against the yellow lamplight, and looked down at Khitai.

"I have a Rom wine that will end all dreams for a few hours," she said, quietly. "Leave him to me."

Khitai walked slowly away through the dark, back to the inn, and through the passages up to the room. The candle was nearly gone, a yellow flicker in a pool of wax. He closed the door behind him, and sat down on the bed. His eyes were fixed on the bag containing the unreadable book, lying on the table; slowly, Khitai leaned back, his hands folded behind his head, as the candle guttered out.

IV

The house of Myrdin Velis occupied a triangular point of land that thrust out into the harbor of Mazain. On one side, the landward, a high gray stone wall barred entry; the road to the quays ran beneath it, filled now with busy traffic of carts and wains, sailors and merchants. On the other two sides, there was a sharp drop into ancient pilings thrusting up from black water. It was not a house that would have been easy to enter; it was said, in whispers, that enterprising thieves had sometimes attempted the task, and that their welcome had been unusual. But no one had tried to steal from Myrdin Velis in a very long time.

The house itself was unbelievably ancient, so old that no one could guess when it had been built, except that it probably predated the city itself. It was a tall cube of black granite, curiously ornamented with lettering in an unknown language, and carved creatures never seen in living form. There were no windows except at the topmost story, and from those windows colored light sometimes flashed, and boatmen passing in the harbor steered well away from those disturbing flickers.

There was a garden all around the house in which a

number of rare trees and plants were kept for uses that only Myrdin Velis could have described. His servants were not communicative; some who had observed them closely doubted that such servants could speak at all. It was certain that whether they had tongues or not, they never used them; these servants, hooded and silent, tended the gardens or kept the house, soundlessly. When one was seen abroad, on any ordinary errand, he spoke to no one; he made his wishes, if he had any, known by pointing with a skinny finger.

Myrdin Velis himself had lived in the house for a long time, so long that even the most ancient city dweller found it hard to assign an exact date to his arrival. He had always looked the same as he did now; his appearance in face and form was youthful. He had always been counselor to the kings who ruled in Mazain, and his services must have been of value, for Mazain was rich, strong, and no enemy had ever won against her in the end.

He counseled others, too; it was said that anyone could find his way to Myrdin Velis with a need or a wish and gain his desire, but there was always a price commensurate with the service. The price was not money, but just what it might be, nobody could say with certainty. As far as money went, Myrdin Velis always paid for whatever he needed in gold pieces, new and shining, and quite real. So it was not for money that he practiced his curious trade.

However, one went to him only out of considerable need, and seldom more than once. The small red-painted door in the land wall, the only entrance to his house, was seldom opened.

But now it was the fifth day, and Owen of Marrdale and Khitai stood at the red door and waited.

"Takes his time," Owen said, gruffly. He had trimmed his beard, bought a new cloak, and a fine leather tunic; he had drunk several cups of a reviving brew prepared by an

old woman of the Rom, and his headache was almost gone. But his temper was vile, and for another reason than the wine he had drunk.

"You're a grand friend to a man in his cups," Owen grumbled to Khitai. Khitai merely smiled his thin smile, a little more widely than usual.

"Left me in the clutches of that Rom witch," Owen said, half to himself. "The Great Mother alone knows what she did to me, or what she might have done, anyway. Gave me a great jar of what might have been a potion of some kind, she did. Probably had a spell in it, and I'll be in trouble of some kind."

"You slept well, though," Khitai said.

"I did that," Owen admitted. "None of those dreams . . . Khitai, I've no blame for you, but I wish I'd never touched that plant of yours."

"Do not forget," Khitai said somberly. "This one, within, promised to lift that from you."

"If I carry out his little task," Owen said. "Which might be almost anything. I'm fated to go through life being gulled by warlocks and Rom witches . . . ah! Do you hear something? Someone's waked, at last." And Owen thumped the door once again with his fist, till an echo rolled within.

The red door swung open, and a hooded, robed figure stood there. From within the hood, pale, dead-looking eyes surveyed the two men. Then the figure lifted a hand, beckoned silently, and turned and walked away.

"We follow this one, I'd guess," Owen said, and Khitai came after him into the gardens. Behind them, the red door closed of itself.

The gardens were still; the only sound was the crunch of gravel under their feet, as they followed their hooded guide along winding paths. On either side, heavy purple-green plants rose high as trees, with here and there oddly brilliant flowers. But there were no birds at all, Owen

noticed, and he glanced down at the path, and saw that the material on which he walked was not gravel, but a compacted mass of what seemed to be gems. Mixed with the glittering jewels were fragments of white bone.

Then they came to the tall narrow doorway of the house itself, and their guide passed within, never turning his head to see if they followed. They went up a wide, spiraling stair, and finally into a sunlit hall, where the warlock Myrdin Velis stood waiting. They saw him as soon as they entered the room, standing near a tall window, his companion Simon at his elbow. Their guide was suddenly no longer there, though neither of them knew just how he had left.

The hall was wide and high, empty of any furniture. A strange spiral design was inlaid on the floor, which reflected the sunlight from the tall windows in a cold glare, like ice. The hall itself seemed curiously cold, in spite of the light; a soft, chill wind eddied steadily through the space.

Owen, looking toward Myrdin Velis, found it oddly difficult to see clearly; the warlock seemed less visible in his tangible self than he had as a projected image. Khitai's hand touched the amulet on his chest, but his face showed no panic.

"My two friends," Myrdin Velis said in his musical voice. "Come closer, and we will speak of our business together." He smiled, but Owen did not feel reassured. However, the two men walked toward the warlock, stopping before the place where he stood.

"Small wizard," Myrdin Velis said to Khitai, "You have not read the book, I know. Had you done so, you might never have come here to me." He smiled more broadly. "I might then have to come to you as supplicant; there is much in that book. Do you then keep your bargain. Give me the book."

Slowly, Khitai drew out the book, and handed it to

Simon, who receiving it, held it open before Myrdin Velis for his master to see. The Sorcerer looked, and nodded.

"It contains many things," he said, slowly. "Much, much, that would have made you a mighty wizard, small one. But one secret alone, one only . . . one that I had great need of. That one secret earns you much, both of you."

He stared at Owen, out of his deep and ancient eyes, for an unbearably long time. Then he spoke again.

"The task I have for you, you may refuse. I shall wait for another, if you do, and bear you no ill will. But neither shall I give you aught."

"Name it, then," Owen said. "How can I say, till I hear?"

"You shall take a small . . . object," Myrdin Velis said. "This you shall guard well, and carry it to a certain place, far in the west. Beyond the known lands, you shall take this thing to a certain place, and leave it there; that is all."

"It doesn't sound difficult," Owen said, slowly.

"Beyond the known lands . . ." Khitai repeated the words very quietly.

"I possess a map, which will guide you well," Myrdin Velis said. "I will not conceal this from you: there are dangers, and I cannot aid you as I did before. Those lands are beyond my reach, and you must depend on your own strength and cunning. These qualities I am sure you have, both of you."

"Done, then, lord wizard," Owen said. "We will set out when you wish. The sooner the better, as far as I'm concerned."

"And I, too," Velis said. "Simon, convey these bold men to the quayside. There is a small ship, which I purchased some time ago; aboard it you will find sufficient stores, and Simon will give you a purse with which you may buy aught else you need. You will also need to hire

a few seamen . . . the ship needs but four or five hands, I think."

His strange eyes scanned them both for a moment before he went on.

"The map describing the way, Simon will also give you, together with that which you must take with you. It will be . . . ready . . . tomorrow. The journey should not take more than half a year, both to go and return; the first part by sea, to the coasts of that land which lies on the other side of the sea. The second part, by land, to another coast. We are agreed, then."

They were dismissed. Owen and Khitai followed the cadaverous Simon silently, out through the great house, through the garden, to the outer door. It was not until they walked in the dock road that Owen finally spoke.

"Simon?"

The lean face turned toward him, eyebrows lifted.

"Are you also a sorcerer?" Owen asked.

"I study the art, under the master Myrdin Velis," Simon answered. "There are none as wise, nor of such long practice, as he. But I have learned much, and hope some day I may come near to his degree."

"You are a man of Nemian?" Khitai asked, glancing at Simon. "I know that accent."

"I was born there," Simon said.

"We rode through those parts, a long time ago," Khitai said. "Strange, to find one of Nemian so far."

Simon strode on silently; he was evidently not inclined to discuss his home country. They were now on the long quays that circled the inner harbor of the city, among warehouses and shops on one side, and ships and boats of all sizes on the other, some tied to the shore, some drawn up on ways. Ahead, a small stone pier thrust out into the water; alongside it lay a high-prowed little ship, toward which Simon walked.

She was a squat, solid little craft, Owen noticed, bearing a single mast, rigged with a lateen sail, and eight oar-

ports to each side. Sailing, he thought four or five men would be enough, but she would need at least a dozen rowers or more should the wind fail. It seemed evident to Owen that Myrdin Velis was not a seaman, no matter what other skills he might have—or else he knew more about the prevailing winds in that sea than anyone else did.

Owen was no great seaman himself, but he had been to sea, and had some knowledge of sail. Khitai had never been in anything larger than a canoe or broader than a river. Simon stalked up the narrow gangplank, and Owen followed. Khitai brought up the rear hesitantly, with a glance at the black harbor water.

"You've no watchman aboard?" Owen asked, glancing about the deck.

"None would touch a ship known to be owned by Myrdin Velis," Simon said. "This ship is safe from thieves. Come, here is the cabin." He went aft and led them within.

"Very comfortable looking," Owen said, approvingly. "I'll feel quite the great lord, aboard this."

Simon drew out a small chest that had been under one of the bunks. He placed it on a table, and opened it.

"Here is gold. Use it to make ready. You must sail with the evening tide, tomorrow. I shall return then, with the maps and the . . . object." Simon's eyes suddenly seemed to go blank. He went to the door, and paused for a moment.

"I shall leave you here. When you are ready, you will find seamen at the house of Per Zalis, who keeps a tavern near this pier. He has already been instructed to find men from whom you may choose a crew. Tomorrow, I return."

He went out, closing the door behind him.

The tavern of Per Zalis was not a palace, even by dockside standards, and the assorted seamen that Owen found there were not of the best, either.

"Did what I could, sirs," Per Zalis, a fat and greasy

specimen, grumbled. "Always willing to serve his lordship, I am. When he says he wants me to bring in some hands, I brings 'em in, what I can get. Damn' few wants to go sailin' off across there where nobody's ever been except maybe a few of them pirates . . . and not many wants to take his lordship's gold, not even secondhand, you might say."

"Afraid of him, are they?" Owen asked.

"Well, you might say that." Per Zalis led Owen to a corner, where a ragged object slumbered, slumped in a puddle of wine on a table. "Now, this 'un, he's a first-rate cook, and can handle a line, if you'll just keep him away from wine . . . and over here's Samo, been at sea twenty years, haven't you, lad?" The "lad" looked to be about eighty years old, and chuckled foolishly at Per Zalis' question.

"We're just waitin' on Captain Larr, a man who used to handle them big merchant galleys out of the north . . . and here he is." A squat, bearded man, who appeared to be surprisingly sober, walked into the tavern, and was greeted enthusiastically by Per Zalis.

"He can handle the whole thing, steer by the stars, whack the rest of the crew about when they need it . . . just the sailing master you'd want, lads."

Larr grunted. Owen explained, as best he could, how the matter was, and Larr nodded, unenthusiastically.

"No money in it, except what your master pays us, eh?"

"Not exactly my master," Owen told him. "But pay for the voyage . . . yes, that's about it. No loot, if that's what you mean. We're only doing a small errand, of sorts."

"Warlock's journeys." Larr grunted. "But I need a bit of change. I'll do it. Sail you to the far coast, and wait for you to return, eh?"

V

Owen stepped into the after cabin, and slammed the door behind him. Khitai, peering out the stern windows, turned a wan face toward Owen, and Owen's expression changed from anger to amusement.

"You look seasick already, Khitai," he said.

"I do not think this will be a pleasant trip, Owen," Khitai said, gloomily. "I do not seem to take to water."

"Neither does our crew," Owen said. "We've just dragged one more human winesack on board, and that makes eight hands all told. Some of them are sober, and the rest will be by the time we're at sea a day. But if we wait here another couple of hours, the sober ones will repent their agreement and vanish. Voyages to the west aren't usual with these bold lads."

As he finished speaking, there was a sound outside. "I hear a footstep on the deck," Khitai said.

The cabin door opened, and Simon entered.

"I see that you are ready to sail," he said.

"In a fashion," Owen replied. "Do you have our instructions, and our package, or whatever it is?"

"I have all you need here," Simon said. He brought out a roll of paper and a square box. The box was of some

dark, smooth wood, heavily carved with twisting patterns, bigger than a man's head. Simon set the box on the chart table with great care, as if it were very fragile; he unrolled the paper next to it.

"The sailing instructions are here," he said. "I see you have hired the man called Larr as a sailing master. Be warned, he is not to be trusted too far. But he will understand these instructions. West, to this degree, until a headland is sighted which resembles a great gabled roof. Then south, five or six leagues, and there will be a round bay, with white beaches, and a range of mountains seen to the west, inland."

Owen nodded, studying the crude map. His quick eye had noticed that it seemed very fresh, as if drawn very recently. And he had noticed one other interesting point about it: there were scribbled letters on its border, in the same language as had been in Khitai's ancient book . . . the book that Myrdin Velis had taken from them.

"Was all this written in the old book, Simon?" Owen asked. "Your master read it quickly, didn't he?"

Simon raised his head and his eyes bored into Owen's balefully. After a moment, he said softly, "You are a quick and clever man, Owen of Marrdale. Be also a wise one. Ask few questions of Myrdin Velis, for every answer has a price."

Simon looked down at the paper once more.

"Here, then, the ship should lie, to await your return. How you may assure yourself of the man Larr's patience and honesty, I know not. He may abandon you." Simon chuckled. "Should he do so, you must find your own way back, and I cannot tell you how to do that. But this is the road you must take after you land. Through this great forest, to the pass in the mountain here. Then, through a waste place, where there is no water, and many dangers. And here, you will find a new coastline; there is a house, having a golden roof, and a white tower. In this house,

there is a green stone, larger than a man. Put what is in this small box on the green stone, and depart."

Owen nodded again, and glanced at the box.

"A long trip, for so small a packet." he commented.

Simon smiled, thinly. "My master bids me tell you that the place you seek in dreams is near to the house of the white tower."

Owen's face whitened, and he gripped the table's edge. After a moment, he controlled himself, and his color returned.

"A fair price," he said.

"There will be treasure nearby," Simon said. "In a place not far from there, you may find more gold and jewels than you can carry—and anything else you desire, like enough." He shot a strange look at Khitai.

"Done, then," Owen said, and put out his hand to the box. "What's within?"

"No!" Simon's hand knocked Owen's aside, swift as a striking snake. "Be careful. Do not open that unless you must . . . not until the time comes to put it on the green stone."

Khitai was staring at the box, his slanted eyes black and shining, his face set in tightly controlled fear.

"I have the sight, Owen," Khitai said. "I can see death-in-life in that box. You, servant of the warlock, why is . . . *that* . . . in that box?"

Simon nodded solemnly. "It might have been better if you knew nothing. But since the small yellow man has some skill, he sees. Therefore, know. The box contains the skull of Myrdin Velis, which must return to the place where he was born. You need know nothing more, for your own peace."

"And so Myrdin Velis is dead?" Owen asked.

"I did not say he was dead," Simon said. "Only that the box contains his skull."

The cabin was silent. Outside, on the deck, Larr was,

bellowing at a few of his men who were preparing the ship for sailing; but in the dim cabin, an almost tangible silence sat heavily.

Simon turned and went out, closing the door behind him. Owen rolled up the document he had left and put it away. Then, gingerly, he picked up the square box and placed it in a wall cabinet, closing the door on it.

"I'm not sure I care for this little journey anymore," he said, rubbing his chin. Khitai carefully avoided looking toward the cabinet where the box rested; he merely shrugged expressively.

"Once one begins such a matter, there's worse can happen by stopping than by going on," Khitai said. "And there is much to see in that unknown land."

When the sun rose, its light slanted through the stern windows, throwing a pattern of yellow light across the cabin floor, a pattern that swung, slowly and rhythmically, with the movement of the ship. Owen, awakened by the light, had rolled from his bunk and stood now, looking aft at the straight wake. The horizon astern was empty, and the sky a clear blue. Evidently they had a fair wind, for the ship was moving swiftly; there was a steady creak and groan of cordage from the big lateen sail, now laid straight abeam. Overhead, Owen could hear the occasional squeal of the whipstaff, held by a steersman who thrust at the weaving rudder.

There was a knock at the cabin door, and Khitai, evidently awake but unhappy, drew a blanket over his head and groaned. Owen flung open the door; the ancient who had been rated a cook stood there unsteadily.

"Would yer honors care for a bite o' breakfast?" the old man asked, leering, as he rocked to and fro. He diffused a strong aroma of stale wine and fish, and as an appetizer he was a failure. But the sharp scent of salt air was working on Owen, and he grinned at the old one.

"What's your name, cook?" Owen asked. "And what's your galley got for us?"

"Cham, sir." The cook bobbed his head, grinning back. "I thought you were a landsman, sir, and wouldn't be having much of a taste for food. But there's a good bit of this and that, fresh stuff took aboard just as we sailed. Will the other gentleman have some, too?"

Khitai, under his blanket, uttered a rumbled curse in his own language, and groaned again.

"I doubt he wants anything," Owen said. "But I'm hungry, Cham, my lad. Use your best skill, and bring enough for two or three. Where's our sailing master, Larr? Maybe he'd care to share breakfast with me, since my friend here seems to be unable to rise."

"Cap'n Larr, he's had his already," Cham said. "Hit me with a plateful of it, he did, and told me to feed it to the sharks. Took a sight of the sun, first thing, and went to his bunk up forward, and he won't be about for a while now. Maybe the lady would like to keep you company, sir."

Owen stared at him.

After a minute, he said in a controlled tone, "Lady. Now, what lady would that be, you old vulture?"

"Why, the lady you gentlemen asked to come along, for your pleasurin', I guess, which great lords like yerselves have a perfect right to be doin', even though poor honest seamen do be spending most of their lives without a woman's fair hand to soothe their pains . . ."

"*What woman?*" Owen roared. Cham fell back a pace, maundering on none the less.

"An honest sailorman has to hope for the sight of a dockside trollop once in a while between voyages, and hope she won't lift his wages. Hard-earned wages, too . . . now, would the lady like breakfast, sir, or wouldn't she?"

"I'll kill this babbler in another minute," Owen said, pulling his beard. "Damn it . . ."

For at that moment she came down the ladder from the poop deck, wrapped in a hooded seacloak and carrying a sack, which she dropped to the deck. A heavy sack, it seemed, and quite evidently, Owen saw, the whole matter was no accident at all.

"You . . ." He shook his head, speechless.

Zelza smiled and glanced at her sack.

"May I enter, red-beard?" she asked sweetly. And to Cham, "Breakfast would not be unwelcome. I slept the night against the rail, wrapped in a sailcloth; it gives a grand appetite."

The cook vanished toward the shelter amidships where his cookfire smoldered, grinning toothlessly. Owen picked up Zelza's bag, and went back into the cabin, where he flung it onto a bunk. She followed meekly.

"You." He turned toward her, his eyes snapping. "I learned something of what was afoot from a drunken sailor who would not sail with any such mad voyage," Zelza said quietly. "Also, I saw certain things in your hand. Therefore, I came aboard, just as you sailed. You will need help, if you are to do this thing. My help."

"You're not my woman, Rom," Owen said harshly. "I'll not have you try to . . . spin whatever web you're spinning. I should make you swim back."

"You are not my man, either, *gahjo*," Zelza said. "You are hers. She whom you saw in the drug dream . . . but our lives are linked. You will see."

In the bunk, Khitai raised himself on an elbow and peered blearily at the two of them.

"In the Sky-bear's name, must you croak like crows while a man's dying?" he asked bitterly. "What's this, Owen, you've brought your Rom along?"

"Great Mother of All!" Owen cried out. "She's not mine, and I did not bring her!" Zelza smiled.

"You are not well, yellow man," she said.

"I am sicker than Great Ancestor after he ate the Magic Lizard," Khitai muttered, and put his head back under the blanket. Zelza moved quickly out of the cabin, and Owen sat down, chin in hand, scowling.

A few minutes later, Cham approached, bearing a platter of food and a steaming pot which he brought into the cabin and set down. Zelza followed, and dismissed the ancient cook with a regal gesture; he scuttled away, chuckling. She poured a beaker full from the steaming pot, and went to the bunk where Khitai lay.

"Sit up, little man, and drink this," Zelza said firmly.

"Ugh," Khitai said, sniffing. "Hell brew. It smells like a dead eel."

"Drink," Zelza commanded. Making a hideous face, Khitai downed the beaker.

A moment later, an expression of profound surprise spread over his face.

"Phugh," he said, rubbing his hand across his mouth. Then, "It works."

"There's an herb for everything," Zelza said calmly. "One for the sickness that comes at sea, and another for sterile women or barren horses, and another for unwilling stallions." She stared at Owen, who turned scarlet and slammed his hand on the table, making the platter of food leap into the air.

"Damn it, woman!""

"I would use no such potion on you, red-beard." she said. "Eat. The old one is a good enough cook, I think."

VI

"It will be several days, at least, even with this fair wind," Owen said, glancing up at the taut sail. "We've no men capable of rowing; if the wind fails, we drift and wait. But so far . . ."

"I've never seen a wind set so strong and well toward the west," Larr said, squinting into the setting sun. He held the cross-stave level, and watched the plumb bob swing to a halt. "We're on a straight course, Lord."

"Good," Owen said. "I'm none so fond of sea-voyaging that I want to make a lifetime work of it."

"You'll be seeking treasure, over there, won't you, lord?" Larr's small, sharp eyes scanned Owen's face.

"No treasure," Owen said. "We have a . . . message, you might say, to deliver for the warlock Myrdin Velis. We shall deliver it, and come back. That's all."

"So far, into the lands where men never go . . . for nothing but a message?" Larr shook his head.

Larr obviously disbelieved him, Owen thought, watching the man. He'd be dangerous if he thought there might be loot for him.

"Shall I have your hammock rigged on the poop deck again, lord?" Larr asked, after a while. He was studying

the red horizon as he spoke, his brows knitted as if he were trying to see something.

"Yes," Owen replied.

"To bring such a handsome bit o' goods along for a seawife, and then spend your time a-nights in a deck hammock . . ." Larr meditated aloud.

"I like fresh air," Owen said shortly, scowling.

"And your friend, the yellow man," Larr went on. "He spends his nights star-counting like a zany. What use are such accounts of stars, once we know where the pole is?"

"He is a wise man, who needs to make lists of everything," Owen told him.

Larr was not listening at all now. He shaded his eyes, and seemed to bite his lip anxiously.

"Lord . . . look there."

"Something . . . what is it?"

"A ship," Larr said. His face was a shade paler.

Owen could see only a tiny black dot, slashed with a vertical line; but Larr's sea vision was better, it seemed.

"A corsair, out of the Isles," Larr said tensely. "And we are but a handful, without even a deck-catapult. If they see us, we are dead men."

"We may outrun them," Owen said, peering ahead.

"Not without a couple of dozen stout oarsmen. Sail alone will not outreach 'em," Larr said. "And they kill for the pleasure of it. Believe me, I know." His hands knotted together, and sweat stood on his brow. "So far westering . . . I wonder why . . . my lord, are you sure there's naught of great value aboard? Some treasure, of which rumor's reached their damned ears? They have spies, even in Mazain . . ."

"Khitai!" Owen shouted, and slammed down the midship ladder two steps at a time. Something within him felt an absurd sense of relief. To think no more about crafty, plotting seamen, peculiar boxes with repellent

contents, black-eyed women with designs on his freedom . . . to end thinking, and take shield and ax in hand, and solve all with a swinging blow.

"Khitai!" Owen kicked open the door. "Arm and up!"

He climbed hastily into a chain corselet, and swung the crescent ax handily in its leather loop. He slung the round shield on his back, picked up his steel cap, and turned back toward the deck. Khitai, dropping a complex astrological calculation in great haste, was arming himself also; and Zelza, with no excitement at all, followed them both to the open deck.

"They've seen us," Larr said, gripping the rail with both hands. "Thousand devils, they've seen us, and they're quartering to cut us off. We're dead men, lords."

Other seamen were crowding to the deck now, muttering their panic. Owen bared his teeth at Larr.

"You could die like a man, then," he barked. "You, there," he called to the seamen, "You'll find pikes against the forecastle bulkhead. Are you sheep?"

"Them's a bad lot, lord," one of the seamen said gruffly. "Might be they'd treat us a bit better if we was to hand you and your money over without givin' 'em too much trouble . . ."

Owen lifted the crescent ax, glaring, and the seaman shrank back. Then he lowered the blade again, shaking his head.

"Sheep you are, then," he growled. "But you're my sheep, and I'll have your tripes for breakfast if you don't do as I say." He turned, to look ahead.

Bare-masted, the distant ship was now bearing down toward them under threshing oars; she looked like a giant insect, flanked by white flashes of beaten foam. Owen's own ship still bore onward, thrust by the full wind, and the distance grew smaller every moment.

"We'll kill a few of them," Owen muttered. He swung

toward Khitai. "Khitai, listen! Now's a time for your small wizardries! We'll never hold these sea-hyenas long, unless we try a trick or two."

"I know no tricks to hold off pirates," Khitai said quietly, balancing his curved sword, waiting.

"I've seen you play with wind-bringing, and wind-changing," Owen said swiftly. "Listen . . . can you bring ice-cold air down out of the sky, quickly?"

"Ah." Khitai's eyes gleamed. "A cold wind . . ."

"And fog," Owen finished. "Sea fog . . . but quickly, quickly."

"If the wind-god of my people comes so far west. . . ." Khitai thrust his sword into the deck, flung down his round shield, and thrust out his arms toward the sky.

Out of the depths of his lungs, full-breathed as a wolf's howl, Khitai cried out a strange word. It rang and echoed, and even as it sounded, Khitai snatched a dagger from his belt, and slashed fiercely at his bare chest. Blood flowed; he slapped the palms of his hands against his chest, and once more stretched out his hands skyward, and cried out again, a sound that made the seamen on the deck shudder and draw back.

Directly overhead, a strange darkness seemed to grow. The following wind suddenly ceased, and the lateen sail hung limp. The boom swung, and the cordage vibrated like a giant harp.

Several white flakes suddenly drifted down over the ship . . . snow! Owen shuddered as the cold seemed to lower itself like a solid, tangible thing down over the deck. Once more Khitai cried out, and suddenly toppled to the deck, to lie stiffly, like a corpse.

Zelza bent over him, but Owen pushed her back.

"No," he said, hoarsely. "No, don't touch him. I have seen him work such magic . . . look! Fog!"

The ice-cold air had met the warm sea, and thick, cottony white fog rose up, and around the ship, deeper and

thicker . . . and the other ship vanished from sight, as did all else.

"Now," Owen said, glaring at the seamen. "All of you . . . be quiet. The corsair may pass us. Even if he does not . . ."

Magnified by the quiet and the fog, a distant creak and thud came to their ears; the sound of beating oars, and the steady beat of the time drum. The men stood frozen, waiting. Then, suddenly, it ceased.

"They hold oars," Larr muttered, cocking his head. "They wait for the fog to clear. They know it is no natural thing . . ."

"Be quiet." Owen listened. There was only silence. But he knew. They were there, waiting.

"Not in this weight of armor," Owen said, aloud, but to no one. Zelza and Larr stared as he flung off his chain shirt, lowering it carefully to the deck so that the links would not rattle. He laid down the steel cap, and the round shield, and kicked off his boots. The crescent ax he slung around his neck by its loops. Then he climbed the rail.

"Luck of Luka," Owen said, calling on the ancient godling of Meryon, but in a whisper. Luka hears whispers as well as shouts, they say. And sliding down, Owen dropped into the cold gray water as quietly as a sea otter, and swam away without a splash.

"He's mad," Larr said.

No one else spoke.

Time passed. The fog seemed thinner, now. The sun was nearly gone, and the grayness was lit now by a low moon that glowed like a lamp in the eastern sky.

"He's dead," Larr muttered, and his eyes suddenly gleamed piggishly as he stared at Zelza. She returned his look with a glance colder than the sea beneath the keel. Then, suddenly, she smiled.

Owen's head, wet and slick, appeared over the lee

rail; his teeth gleamed whitely. He hooked the crescent ax over the rail and pulled himself up and over.

"By the gods, that water's cold," he smiled, rubbing water from his beard with the back of his hand. "I could almost pity those poor lads out there."

From the thin fog, there came strange sounds—a wail from many throats, a confused sound of fear and rage, and yelling curses. There was a splashing, too, and other sounds less definable.

"I drove a hole through, close to their sternpost, far enough to let in the sea." Owen grinned. "Then, while they ran to shoot arrows at what they thought was a sea-devil, I swam the length of their ship, and used the ax again, on their bows. Listen! They're awash, fore and aft, and too many men to stay afloat . . . too much loot, also, I'll be bound."

Khutai pulled himself to his feet, and stood unsteadily, leaning on the rail.

"They are drowning," he observed calmly. He glanced upward. "Take them, Sky-bear."

"Sea-father will take 'em, more like." Larr laughed scornfully. His courage, now that it was not needed, had returned.

And the wind, falteringly, was returning too. The sail rattled, and the ship moved, slowly. In the dark sea, there was a distant scream, and then quiet.

VII

Three men sat in the shade of the forecastle, squatting on the deck. Cham sliced vegetables into a pot for the fish stew he intended to cook for the evening meal; one of the seamen had made a good catch. Larr, the sailing master, sat with his eyes half closed, chewing, on a cud of the magweed he favored, a narcotic popular with sailors. Next to him sat a black-bearded sailor who was known simply as Knife, and who apparently possessed no other name. The absence of a tongue made it unlikely that he could have mentioned a name if he had one.

The wind was still strong and fair to the west; the men were hardly working at all, although Larr kept them busy with deckwork and minor repairs.

"You've been aft a lot," Larr said in a sleepy voice, shifting the cud of magweed to his cheek.

"Hey?" Cham looked up from his vegetable cutting and grinned foolishly. "Aye, yes, I do go aft, bringing the lords their dinners and all, I do . . ."

"Any idea where they keep it?" Larr asked, his eyes still closed.

"Keep what, master?"

"Their gold," Larr said softly. "Or maybe a treasure

map, or such. They're not making this mad trip just for a kind of errand for some warlock."

"D'ye think they've got a lot of gold with 'em?" Cham asked eagerly, showing his few remaining teeth in a vulpine grin.

"You could have a look, cookie, might be when none of 'em are watching, might be," Larr suggested lazily. "Just to see where they keep it, or what it is. Some chance might come to pick up a bit for a few poor sailormen, like you and me . . . of course, I can't be rummaging around in the cabin, me not having any business in there, properly speaking. And I wouldn't care to have that red-bearded chap swing at me with that devil ax he's got there. Nor maybe have that nasty-lookin' little yellow man call a devil to go for me, either. And that witch woman—a likely looking piece she might be, but I'd think she might be worse than the other two, if she had a mind to."

Cham nodded, cackling to himself.

"Might be I'd have a look, master," he muttered. "Just a look, mind you. You're right about the three of 'em. Wouldn't pay to set them at us. But just to look, see what's there . . . might do it."

Larr grunted. "Try it, cookie. Let me know what you see, eh? And it's just between us. Us and old Knife here, what can't tell anybody anyway, hey?" He dug Knife in the ribs with heavy jocularity. "He never learned to write, before they took away his clapper for talking too much, eh, Knife?"

The black-bearded one made a gulping noise, indicating agreement. Larr leaned back, and closed his eyes, while Cham continued to slice his vegetables. But now, the old cook had a glitter in his eyes as he cut away.

With Cham, an idea was something for immediate action or no action at all. He happened to get his chance on the same afternoon, when Owen, Khitai, and Zelza were

all three taking their ease on the quarter-deck, near the rudder stave. Owen had unearthed the small harp and was playing a strange, soft tune. He did not sing well, but he chanted, half under his breath, in the old language of Meryon, half remembered from his childhood, a very old ballad. Zelza listened, and Khitai leaned on a rail, studying the sea.

Meanwhile, Cham rummaged below. If anyone had caught him, he would have claimed he was cleaning the cabin.

As a thief, Cham had always been enthusiastic but inexpert; but the box in the cabinet was not even concealed very well. He had already noticed the roll of papers, but Cham could not read, and he had already forgotten Larr's theory of a treasure map. All that remained in Cham's dim old mind was a vague idea of gold. Much gold would buy much drink. He could stay drunk a long time, he thought.

He lifted the box, fumbling for its catch. Heavy, heavy, he thought, probably full of round coin . . . then he heard a sound outside, and abruptly wrapped the box in a blanket which he snatched from the bunk.

He lugged the bundled box in his arms, out of the cabin, and scuttled forward with it. Blankets to be aired out, he said to himself . . . that's what I'll say if they asks.

But nobody asked.

The crewmen slept forward, under the lee of the foredeck; usually they rolled into sleeping blankets and canvas, foul with age, in a row. There was no privacy there, but when the small oil lamp that swung from an overhead beam was out, there was near-darkness. There would be a little light, moonlight through an open deck scuttle, but Cham intended to work by touch. There'd be gold inside, and he could hide it in his blankets, and take the box back, and nobody would know, Cham thought, and smothered a small cackle of glee.

It was the sailor called Knife that found Cham, in the early morning. The old man was huddled into his blanket, one skinny claw holding the box, which was closed. Only a corner of the box showed. The blankets were dark and sticky, and a trickle of blood ran out onto the deck. Knife lifted a corner of the blanket, and looked at what was there. He nodded, and put back the blanket. There was no one else in the forecastle; Knife bent down and grasped the box, and went quickly to his own bedding, where he hid it. Then he went out onto the deck, to find the sailing master.

A few minutes later, Larr was trying to explain, to a sleepy Owen.

"There was no head at all," Larr said, sweating visibly. "Not no head, and other bits of him, gone. Like . . . like he'd been et. And he didn't make no noise, that's what the others say . . . what is it? What have we got aboard, Lord?"

Owen went and looked, and walked aft again, feeling sick. Zelza stood at the cabin door, and Khitai looked down from the deck overhead.

"Maybe you'd best have a look forward, Khitai," Owen said. "If you've got the stomach for it. Whatever happened, it's not pretty, man." Zelza made as if to follow Khitai, and Owen put out a hand to stop her. "No, not you."

"I've seen things that might turn your red beard grey, *gahjo*," Zelza said, curling her lip. She glanced down at his hand on her arm, and a slow smile touched her mouth corners. "Still . . . this is the first time you've touched me."

Owen dropped his hand, his mouth set.

"Go and look, if you must," he said, in an icy voice. He went into the cabin, and sat down heavily.

A few moments later, Khitai came back, and Zelza after him. Both looked shaken. Outside, there was a sound

of fearful murmuring among the little group of seamen, all gathered near the mainmast; none had the courage to return to the forecastle shelter.

"I smell a great evil, there," Khitai said. "I do not know what killed that old man, but it was nothing ordinary. There could be no . . . a great rat, maybe. No . . ." He shook his head.

"I know the mark of human teeth," Zelza said. "I saw that mark."

"Human?" Owen looked up, scowling.

"One of the crew . . ." Khitai looked at Zelza. "Maybe a skin changer. A beast man. We had such among my people."

"There are no signs of that, on any of the seamen," Zelza said quietly. "I looked at their hands as I returned. I know the signs of that disease too, yellow man."

The three looked at each other.

"One of us . . ." Owen said.

"Not in our hands, either," Zelza said. "No. There is a demon on this ship."

"Lord Owen!" It was Larr's voice, outside. Owen rose and opened the cabin door. Larr stood, a little in advance of the huddled group of men, staring sullenly toward the quarterdeck. He held a boarding pike, leaning on it, his knuckles white on the shaft.

"Lord Owen," Larr said again, "We are afraid."

Owen stared at him under lowering brows for a minute, and then laughed harshly.

"So am I, sailing master," he said, baring his teeth at the man. "But of what, I can't say. Name the demon, and we'll be able to call it to account. What slew the cook?"

"Aye." One of the seamen, a little bolder, stepped forward to stand next to Larr. "What slew the old winesack, and ate him like a herring?"

"One of you." A voice came, accusingly from the seamen.

"One of you three, we think, lord," Larr said, grim-faced. "Servants of the black devil Myrdin Velis. You say you carry a message for him, when all the world knows that one could turn himself into a bird from hell and fly where he wished, bear his own messages. You're no courtiers of his. You're his hunters. And you're hunting men's blood and brains."

Zelza, behind Owen, laughed aloud, a silvery sound.

"You fool," she said to Larr.

"It might be you, witch," Larr shouted, his face darkening with fury. "Witches! I've seen 'em afore. Draw all men, bed with none, fear of losing magic! You've slept alone these nights, since we sailed, have you not, witch? Neither fine lord here has had a taste of your fine flesh, have they? And why not, if there's no black sorcery in it all?" He spoke to the men, over his shoulder, pointing with the pike. "Can any of you see leaving such a platter untasted, if there's no evil work afoot . . . can you?"

His curious logic seemed to be reaching the seamen. They growled, and began to edge forward cautiously.

"You'll swim for it, warlocks!" Larr bellowed. "You'll go over the side, and no more of this demon work!"

"You're a fool," Zelza said again, in a clear, measured tone; but she was watching him, and her right hand was under her cloak.

Larr drew back his arm, the pike lifted, aimed at Zelza; and her hand flashed out. A streak flashed through the air, and Larr dropped the pike, with an almost womanish shriek, grasping at the long thin knife in his upper arm.

A heavy marlinspike shot past Owen's head, to thud against the cabin bulkhead behind him, and the seamen began to move forward with louder oaths and more confidence. Khitai dodged into the cabin, and out again, a weapon in either hand; Owen's crescent ax, and his own crossbow.

"Here!" Khitai pressed the ax into Owen's grasp, and

with the same motion Khitai brought the bow up and let fly.

A man dropped with a groan, and Owen's ax whirled high in the air as he moved toward the seamen.

Zelza too had dodged back into the cabin, and now she came back out; in her hand, a three-foot length of shining steel, a cutlass that had hung on a rack of weapons within. She held it low and forward, the point weaving an evil design as she came up beside Owen. It was quite obvious that she knew how to handle it; and as an unwary seaman forgot to give ground, she proved her ability with a swift, serpentine slash. The man howled, and rolled across the deck, splattering blood.

The others moved more quickly after that. The mass of them moved back, all the way to the forecastle shelter, where they grouped again in a shouting, cursing, threatening mob. Larr, sitting and clutching his bleeding arm against the lee rail, cried out hoarsely, to the three on the after end.

"Devils!" He spat, and groaned. "You'll go no farther in any case, damn you! We'll down sail and tack east again . . . row if we have to! Your magic wind won't help you with the sails down! You . . . you men, get to the lines. Lower the main, and we'll tack with a new rig . . ."

But most of the running lines led aft, near to the quarter deck, too near for the men's liking. One bold soul did step forward, but never reached the rail at all; a twang from Khitai's bow, and the man pitched into the scuppers, where he rolled face down.

"It will be night," Owen said to Khitai, watching the cowering men forward. "They'll either rush us in the dark or cut the mainsail lines when it's dark."

"There will be a moon," Khitai said. "And we may keep a firebasket ready, for more light." His thin smile was savage. "I do not think we need worry too much. As

a matter of fact, friend Owen . . ." He aimed carefully, and the crossbow thumped again. A seaman, nailed to the forward bulkhead by a thick arrow through his throat, had time for a single blood-choked scream before dying.

"Khitai!" Owen gripped the yellow man's arm. "No, damn it!"

"We sight land in the morning, if the chart is right," Khitai said, still smiling. "We need no more of these dogs. Let me slay them, one by one, and do you slay any that have liver enough to try a charge against us then." Khitai glanced at Zelza, and her smile to him was equally savage. "Perchance the lady will have one or two more to spit on that bodkin she uses so well."

"Can't say I dislike the idea," Owen said. "But . . . no, there's no honor in it. I'm a thief and a masterless man, and I'm running errands for a black wizard, look you, and it's all of it enough dirt on my face. I can't be slaying fools for the pleasure of it." He bit his lip, staring at the huddle of men forward, and was silent for a moment. Then he burst out, in a grating whisper, as if to himself, "Weren't there enough of 'em, on that bloody pirate's hulk, yesterday? Sent men down in the cold sea, with no chance to fight back . . . like a damned rat, gnawing their hull. True enough, Luka's need is true necessity. Man's got to do what he must . . . but let the dogs live awhile."

"He has the heart of a sparrow, this one," Khitai said to Zelza ruefully. "He will not kill except when his blood is up. This I do not understand. Many times we would have been men of wealth, had this one known how to slay in cooler blood."

Zelza laughed. "No need to slay them, true," she said. "Tomorrow, let them swim to whatever shore we come to. There, they'll lie ambush for us, and we'll have to slay them or die. Therefore, we've given them another day to live their dogs' lives. Owen, I do not understand your mercy."

He shrugged and twirled the ax.

"You understand little enough, Rom," he said, not looking at her, his eyes still fixed on the men forward. "And I . . . I understand less. But . . . in the dream, I never killed any man. No one killed . . . in that land."

"I hear words," Zelza said. "I have heard them before. And you have two lines in your palm where most men have only one. But I do not know about your dream, except that it seems to keep you from noticing real things."

"It was the sacred plant," Khitai said, shaking his head. "I did not know . . . I have used it, more than once, and gained good from it. He . . . he saw what he should not have seen."

"Friend," Owen said, very coldly, "do not talk of that."

"She should know," Khitai said. "She has the sight. She may know more than I about such a thing."

Owen's mouth set hard. After a moment he said in a low voice, "Tell if you must, small wizard, who cannot keep silence."

"The sacred plant gives visions," Khitai said, and Zelza nodded.

"I have heard of it, though I've never found any," she said.

"Even in my own land, it is very rare," Khitai said. "I possessed a packet of the plant's dried berries, and used them very sparingly. Then, one day, after I had used the plant, my friend became curious."

Owen uttered a short laugh.

"I saw the little man sleep, with a smile such as he never wears awake," Owen said. "Then, when he returned to life, he said he had learned . . . truths. Said he knew more of himself and of his soul. As if he had one, which I am not sure of." Owen swung the ax thoughtfully as he spoke. "Then, like the fool I am, I became a-hungered for wisdom. Axman and thief I am, skilled at laying of sieges and

cutting throats. So I'd become wise, in an easy fashion. I would swallow wisdom in the form of a black berry. Hah!"

"He ate the plant," Khitai said. "Then, as happens, he slept. But . . . this he does not believe . . . he saw a former life. No, friend, do not shake your head. Men live many times."

"A fable of your yellow folk," Owen said. "Once is more than enough."

"He saw a land and a people of long ago, I think," Khitai said. "But he became . . . glamoured of that place. It seemed to be his home, and he a long exile."

"It was." Owen's voice was full of a strange pain. "It was . . . the place from which I came. I knew it. I knew my folk, and the music, and the face of . . . of . . ." His mouth twisted. "And now I cannot even remember her name!"

"She is long ago," Khitai said.

"She lives," Owen said stubbornly. "That place must be real. Sometimes . . ." He looked very strange, now. "Sometimes I think that all I am, all this world about me, is less real. I may be dreaming what I am and where I am. I know not. But if Myrdin Velis knows where that place is, and his word is truth . . . we go there, now."

Zelza stared at him, silently, her expression unreadable.

"I know no cure," Khitai said. "Never, in all the wise ones I have known who ate the magic plant, have I ever seen it thus. When we use it, we go into another world, of bright, strange colors and uncertain forms . . . somewhere that may be the land of gods, for all I know. But sometimes, we can learn new things. Sometimes we go mad or die there . . . but I never expected this."

Khitai played absently with the cocking lever of the bow, and stared down at the deck, darkly.

"My friend Owen," he said slowly. "He is a little mad, was so even before the berry, I think. Look how even

now he spared that filth. I have seen him slay twenty men and sing a dirge over them afterward, a thing of great beauty. His folk are forever singing and weeping and slaying, and I do not understand any of it, except the slaying. They have no writing nor books, yet they're constantly a-hunt for wisdom, and when they find it, they make it into rhymes instead of using it."

Zelza laughed. "Never mind, yellow man. You have your ways. But red-beard's ways are more like those of my folk. I think I begin to understand a little."

She turned toward Owen.

"I could make you see that land again," she said, and he stared at her, wide-eyed.

"I could," she repeated. "But if it were truly a land of long ago . . . if all in it were dead in ancient times . . ."

"I know that . . . *she* lives, now," Owen said stubbornly. "I have a strange sort of feeling . . . no, there's no way to prove it. Say only, I know."

Zelza said, "And if I showed you otherwise, me you would hate as if I had murdered that land with my own hand. The messenger of ill fortune is often blamed for it." She lifted one shoulder in a gesture. "Well, *baro*, should you ever wish me to give you my own sight of that place you dream of . . ."

"No," Owen said. "Not . . . yet." He glanced forward. "There'd be little time for playing at visions with those ready to leap at our throats. No . . . let's move back, behind the cabin door. One of us will keep watch, all day, turn about."

"They may come to their senses soon enough, in any case," Khitai suggested. "If they see you'll let them live, they may realize they've been fools to listen to the sailing master."

"What of the demon that killed old Cham?" Zelza reminded them. "If it returns . . ."

"We are armed," Owen said. "Come, into the cabin."

VIII

The day went very slowly. As the sun rose, high into the heavens, the ship kept on with an even speed; the great sail was taut before that strange wind that never ceased. Owen had gone to the quarter-deck, and secured the whipstaff tiller with spring lines, so that the rudder remained steady. If they were off their course, he knew, they could not be too far off. Forward, the mutineers huddled and talked in undertones, watching the cabin door; once one of them had tested the watchfulness of the cabin's occupants by moving aft. He had joined the other, dead in the scuppers with an arrow in his throat. The watch was not rested again.

And at last the sun sank slowly, and on the twilit horizon Owen could see what might be a bank of low cloud, or might be a headland. He studied it, from the cabin door, and glanced to the sky. A low hanging moon was rising, and there was more than enough of the pale light to see the deck. The seamen were only dark shadows, under the lee of the forecastle.

An hour passed. Zelza slept on one of the bunks, her quiet breathing as untroubled as if she had been in her own caravan. Khitai sat cross-legged on the deck, silent

as an idol. Owen leaned against the door post, watching.

Then, suddenly, a sound tore the night.

It was a wild, bubbling cry, wordless and agonized, like nothing human, a howl that went on for a long minute without stopping. Out of the darkness of the forecastle, into the pale silver light on deck, a figure came, reeling and stumbling, arms flapping madly like a great birds. It was the sailor Knife.

It was his tongueless mouth that had emitted the howl; he tripped, still howling, and fell flat, his hands scratching on the deck, his feet kicking. Owen lunged forward, ax raised against he knew not what, while Khitai had sprung up behind him. Zelza was sitting up now, wide awake.

But the figure in the moonlight, spread out on the deck, was still. A thick stream flowed away from Knife's body, spreading out blackly; he was dead.

"I saw . . ." Khitai began suddenly, and stopped.

"Yes," Owen said. "It . . . it *hopped* away from him. Like a white frog . . . as big as a man's head. Great Mother, *what was it?*"

"As big as a man's head," Khitai said softly.

A light flared in the forecastle, and voices rose, cursing. Suddenly, the light went out, and there was another howl of anguish, this time cut horribly, significantly, short. It sounded like Larr.

"As big as a man's head," Khitai said again, and seized Owen by the arm, pulling him back into the cabin. Khitai kicked the door shut, and hissed, "Zelza! Flint and steel—light the lamp. It may be able to work only in darkness!"

The girl scratched the lighting flint swiftly, and the oil caught in the lamp; the cabin filled with yellow light. From outside, forward, there came a third scream.

"Look!" Khitai said. He was at the cabinet which had held the box and scroll. Now only the scroll was there. The box was gone.

"The skull of Myrdin Velis." Khitai said thoughtfully.

"And his servant said he . . . was not really dead."

"Something that hopped . . . as big as a man's head," Owen said.

"I am afraid, now." Zelza said. Her face was very pale.

They sat, silently, watching the door. As the night went on, there were sounds: unpleasant sounds, and the thud of men's feet, running. But running apparently did not help; whatever followed moved faster than a running man. One man almost reached the cabin door before it caught him; they heard his maddened scrabble on the wooden panels, and then, silence.

"I would rather I had killed them myself," Owen said, after a long while. There had been no more sounds for some time. The other two said nothing at all.

Then, after an even longer time, the light at the cabin scuttle overheard began to show pale gray. The sun was rising.

Owen opened the cabin door, the ax ready. The man who had almost reached the door was there on the deck, his blind eyes staring up into the pearl-gray morning sky. Beyond, there were three others, in various positions, all very dead. There was no sign of life at the forecastle head, only a human arm dropped carelessly at its doorway.

But looming ahead, only a mile or two away, was the shape of a huge rocky headland, the one described in the instructions. The ship ran steadily toward it, and there was a flicker of white breaker at its base. Owen took it in at a glance, and cried out for Khitai, even as he turned to leap up the ladder to the quarter-deck.

"Haul that line down!" Owen called down to Khitai as he sliced the tiller's lines with the ax, and seized the staff, swinging the rudder hard over.

Khitai looked confused, and Owen shouted again. "The mainsheet! That one, yes! Pull on it, man! Pull like the devil!"

The sail slanted about, half down and rattling wildly;

the rudder thrust turned the ship, and slowly, heeling over at a sharp angle, she began to move sidelong to the land. She still drifted inward too much; as Zelza climbed to the quarter-deck, Owen cursed again, watching the land come nearer.

"You!" He thrust the tiller into Zelza's hands. "Hold it there, hard over. Brace yourself on the deck, woman, and hold it there, or we'll be inshore in a minute."

He leaped over the quarter-deck rail and landed on the deck below. He ran to the lines, and hauled with Khitai. And finally, the line was down and fast; the sail, was angled now, and the ship slid down along the coast, safe.

"All right, Zelza . . . I'll take it now." Owen made the tiller line fast again, and stood, panting a little, leaning on the rail. "A little exercise . . . good for the legs. By Luka's holy nose, this ship's a floating slaughtership." Khitai was bending over one of the bodies on the midship deck, and he straightened up to Owen.

"They have been chewed," Khitai said, grimly. He looked toward the dark forecastle. "And in there . . ."

"Wait a bit, Khitai." Owen came back down to join him. "You think it's our little parcel that did . . . all this?"

Khitai nodded.

"Well." Owen rubbed his hand across his red-beard and sighed. "A bargain is a bargain. I contracted to bring that bit of bone to where it wants to go—though I never guessed it had such tastes. Wherever the damned thing is, it goes back into its box now."

"It probably cannot slay in the daylight," Khitai said. "It may not even be able to move."

Owen glanced at him. "It's the first skull I've come across could move by night *or* day, man. And if I've my way, it will be the last. Still, your words are a comfort. Stay you here, and I'll step foreward and interview our bony assassin."

But Khitai followed as Owen walked toward the forward end.

They stepped over and around the bodies, and the fragment that guarded the forecastle door; Owen kicked open the door, and looked within.

"Gah," he said inelegantly. "Hold that door open a bit, Khitai." Then, peering in the dim light, "There. That's the box, right enough. Lid closed, too. Let's have it out here."

"He emerged, holding the black box gingerly at arm's length.

"It feels as heavy as it did," he said. "Do you suppose the thing's back inside, like a snake gone to earth? Shall I open it?"

Khitai studied it a moment. Then, taking it from Owen, he lifted the lid an inch, and stared within. Carefully, he closed it again, and snapped shut a metal hook and eye.

"It had been opened, thus," Khitai said, pointing. "Now, closed again, it cannot run free. Yes, the skull is there."

"Oho!" Owen saw it now. "That old fool, Cham. He stole it and dragged it to his bunk."

"And opened it," Khitai added. "It would seem that Myrdin Velis is indeed not wholly dead. Or at any rate, that he prefers to be left in peaceful contemplation of his wisdom . . . in his box."

Owen took back the box, and they walked back toward the cabin, and entered.

"I'll just tuck him back," Owen said, closing the wall cabinet door. He stared thoughtfully at the closed door.

"Where do you suppose the rest of him is?" Owen asked, and Khitai uttered a dry chuckle.

"Is there not enough here now?" Khitai asked.

IX

"Part of our sorrows, friend," Owen said as they steered southward along the coast, "will be a safe and swift return. We've no crew at all, look you. It's well fed the fish along here will be, with all those tasty morsels we've been rolling over to feed 'em. But we can't handle this great lolloping barge ourselves alone."

"True," Khitai said. "But for myself, I would rather travel a year on land than a day on water. Ill fortune to my folk who go on the water; if it were not for Zelza's potion, I would be dead of seasickness now."

"I'd say that's the round harbor we seek, there ahead," Owen said, shading his eyes. "Now, if we can but steer well enough . . . there's still a breeze."

All the landmarks were there. A bay, nearly a perfect circle of quiet water, was rounded by white beaches and thick green forest behind them. In the distance, a range of mountains rose, their tops faintly whitened; a notched pass broke their line, in the center. The ship still moved under the faint wind, but very slowly; Owen dropped the sail and let it lie, a slovenly looking heap, yard and all, on the deck. The ship drifted closer to the beach, and the

keel scraped lightly on gravel. Owen lifted the stone anchor and heaved it over.

"It'll never hold this hulk if there's any wind," Owen told the other two. "But she'll probably ground on the first tide anyway. I doubt we'll be able to sail back, even if we had a crew. Which we do not."

Khitai shrugged. "There will be a land path back, I imagine. Besides, one land is as good as another. There is knowledge to be found in a forest as well as a city."

Zelza laughed. "The yellow man is no fonder of cities than I am. For myself, I am not displeased. My folk will obey another till I return, if I ever do, and I am with the brave lord Owen . . ."

Owen glared at her. "Will you never cease this mocking?"

She stared back at him, black eyes gleaming. "I do not always mock. And I am growing tired of waiting for my lord Owen to remember that I am living flesh and not a vision. I may decide to use my Rom ways yet."

He returned her stare, hard-eyed.

Then, suddenly, Zelza's chin lifted, and she turned away.

"A curse on you . . ." she muttered, and drew her cloak about her face.

"You," Owen said, looking at her. "Weeping. Rom women do not weep."

"No, they do not," she said, and lifted her head; her eyes were brilliant, but there were no tears visible.

"It may be a long, long walk," Owen said. "If we'd been able to get a couple of horses on that tub . . . ah, well. One foot after the other, and away."

He felt a curious, slightly mad gaiety, as the three of them moved through the forest, toward the distant, half-seen ranges of mountains; it showed in the way he strode on ahead, the ax on his shoulder, his steel cap tilted back.

It was something that drew at him, something that seemed to whisper from behind the mountains, in the voices of his half-forgotten dream.

It was a forest of tall pines, open pine-needle ground under the green shade, easy walking, with little brush to impede them. The thing that troubled Khitai, which his forest-bred senses noticed immediately, was the quiet. There seemed to be no birds, nor even squirrels.

"I thought to bring a little dry food, in my pack," Khitai said, at last. They were walking now, single file, along a narrow low ridge that seemed to lead due west. "But if this forest is the grave it seems to be, we may well go hungry soon. There's no supper in sight. Not even a woodrat."

"I've seen that, too." Zelza said, looking around her. "I have never seen a woodland so quiet."

"If need be, we might boil our friend in the box for soup." Owen said, with a bark of laughter. Khitai did not laugh, nor did Zelza, and Owen glanced back at their grave faces, and laughed again.

"He frightens you? Come, he's safe in his box." Owen slapped the lid, as he strode on. "And he might prove a tasty soup bone at that. He's fed on flesh enough, it seems." He laughed again, the sound echoing off amid the pines.

And, like an echo, but certainly not an echo, the laughter returned. It was not Owen's blaring laugh, but a high, childish laughter, clear and thin and distant; and it came from all around, coming down the empty, shadowy lanes of pine. The sunlight slanted in long beams down through the pinetops, and onto the brown carpet; and there was no living thing there, in any direction. Yet there was laughter; children's laughter.

Then, after a while, it stopped, and the utter silence returned.

The party of three had stopped, and three pairs of eyes scanned the forest, very carefully.

"You know," Owen said, after a minute had passed, "I find this forest unsettling."

"I think we had better hurry," Khitai said. "I do not like the laughter of children where there are no children."

They started forward again, and now went as rapidly as they could, almost at a trot. There was no more laughter, but as they hurried along there were odd rustlings which did not sound quite like a wind in the pine tops, and once they heard a sound of what might have been running feet somewhere.

Then, just ahead, the trees began to thin abruptly; the pine forest gave way to a rising level ground covered with grass and brush with scattered clumps of low, twisted trees. At the very edge of the pines there were low ridges of earth, long banks that seemed almost to be boundaries to the forest. The three crossed these with a queer feeling of great relief.

Out in the grass, they slowed down to catch their breath. Khitai bent down and picked something up, and tossed it up and down in his hand.

"Metal," he said, wonderingly. "A tool, I think. And there . . ." He picked up something else. "A buckle. Owen, I think this place was a field of battle once."

"It might have been." Owen's feeling of exhilaration was stronger again.

"There, another bit." Khitai pointed to it. "A helmet, I think. Rusted nearly away. I wonder . . ."

Zelza said, "I wonder if men once went up against that forest, and fought against it."

"And were defeated," Khitai said.

"There was a road here, where we walk," Zelza said, pointing to the ground. The grass did indeed seem to be patterned, as if a path had once run there, but had been grown over.

"There's a road, indeed, farther along," Owen said, and wondered suddenly how he knew. But he was right.

By gradual stages, as they walked toward the distant notch in the hills, the road seemed to emerge from the grass, first as a mere trace on the earth, then at last as a real road, made of flat stones laid together.

"Where there's a road, there may be people," Khitai mused. "Although this is a very old road."

"And where there are people there'll be trouble," Owen told him. "I think there'll be none, though. They who built this road are long gone, and I don't think there have been travelers here lately."

"But I've still seen no game," Khitai said. "And we'll have to camp soon."

"We'll manage on what's in our sacks," Owen said. "And I'm not tired. Are you, Zelza?" His voice had a note of concern, which the girl noted.

"I can outwalk any *gahjo*," she said, but she smiled.

"Then let's see how many miles we can cover by moonlight," Owen said. "Maybe the hunting will be better farther on."

They continued on along the straight, white roadway; the sun set, and the moon lit their way now. The notch in the hills seemed slowly to grow closer.

Then, at long last, Khitai was about to suggest that they stop and rest, when both he and Owen saw the spark of light at the same time. Zelza had seen it a moment earlier; then the two men called out together.

"Maybe a peasant, or a herder," Khitai surmised. "Though I have seen no evidence of any kind of herds . . . Owen, what think you?"

The light was a tiny yellow dot on the side of the rising mountain just ahead. But there was a strange note in Owen's voice, a note of fury as he spoke.

"Damned canting fools!" he said, grinding his teeth.

Zelza cast a startled look at him. His face, in the moonlight, was set in a mask of rage, and he gripped the ax tightly.

"Watchers!" he said. "Praying donkeys . . . keep a man from what's his own . . . priests and shammers . . ."

"Owen," Khitai said, sharply.

Owen's eyes seemed to clear, and he stared. "What?"

"What are you talking about? Watchers?"

"What watchers?" Owen asked. He turned toward the light. "There . . . let's go there." His voice was still very odd, and he seemed to be sleepwalking.

"He's fey," Zelza said in a low voice as they followed him; he was nearly running now toward the spot of light, which grew as they approached what seemed to be a ruined square.

"He is mad," Khitai answered, and had time for no more. Ahead of them, the light was now visibly a tall, arched doorway set in a stone wall. Against the moonlight, the wall's broken edges showed sharp and clear; it seemed to be part of a mass of half fallen, ruined masonry, a building that had nearly sunken into the earth with time. Beyond the arched door, they saw a cavelike hall containing a blazing campfire, around which dark shapes were huddled.

And Owen swung the crescent ax in a wide circle around his head, and strode in through the doorway, his eyes ablaze with a demonic fury. As Khitai and Zelza ran in behind him, they saw the people who had huddled about the fire leaping to their feet. They were small, shaggy people with ragged sheepskins tied about them, lifting weaponless hands to defend themselves from the fury of the ax.

"Watchers! Thieves! Go find the dead you keep so well!" Owen roared, and the ax swung back, whistling. Zelza uttered a strange, wild cry, and threw herself against his arm. The ax flew wild, and he released it, letting it bury itself in the ground.

Then he stood, staring down at his arm, where she still

clutched him; her nails had clawed a scarlet line across his flesh.

"Owen, Owen of Marrdale!" Khitai cried out, facing him.

"I . . . I am . . . Owen," he said, with great difficulty, and suddenly sat down on the bare earth, with a grunt.

The small people—four men and two women, one holding a scrawny child—were cowering against the farther wall, staring in blank terror. Khitai turned and held out his hands; he tried to make his words sound soothing, though he doubted they spoke his tongue.

"Peace, peace," Khitai said, and smiled. "No fear. Peace."

The small people gibbered fearfully at him, and listening carefully, he thought he recognized a word or two; it seemed like a dialect he had once heard. They edged along the wall, seeking a way to pass the terror that was Owen.

Owen, meanwhile, was gripping his head in his hands and staring wildly up at the furious face of Zelza. She slapped his cheek hard.

"Brave armsman!" she snapped. "Killer of children! Mouse-slayer! What madness was that?"

"Madness," Khitai said over his shoulder. "It was that. He was possessed. Owen! Are you . . . are you Owen?"

"Great Mother!" Owen gripped Zelza's wrists swiftly, as she was about to slap him again. He swung to his feet, and stood staring, still holding her wrists, and looking over her shoulder at his near-victims cowering.

"What happened?" he asked.

"Don't you know?" Zelza hissed at him. "You charged these poor creatures, swinging that meat ax . . . they'd done nothing. Women and a child . . ."

"I . . . tried to kill these?" Owen shook his head. "No . . . not . . . not these." He glanced around him,

an expression of horror on his face. "I saw this place . . . all the lights. The Watchers were here, preparing the dead . . . chanting, their robes all jeweled . . . and this place, the place of preparation . . ."

He looked again, and there was pain in his voice. "But it's a ruin."

"And these are poor peasants of some kind," Khitai said "Not Watchers. These were in your dream, I think."

One of the skin-clad men seemed bolder; he moved forward a step or two, gesturing, while one of the women clutched at his arm, trying to draw him back. They were all still very frightened, but it seemed to be dawning on them that they were not, after all, going to be killed at once. The spokesman waved his hands, and chattered incomprehensibly, bobbing his head.

Khitai held out both hands, palms up, in a conciliatory gesture. He unslung his bow and laid it down, and took Owen's ax from his hand. He surrendered the weapon and stood quietly, staring up and around at the broken arches of the ruin around him.

"Zelza," Owen said, in a strained voice. "Take my apologies . . . I thank you for stopping me. To have killed these . . . for no reason . . . would have been a foul thing." He shook his head, as if to clear it. "For a few moments, I became someone else. I was in the dream again, and I knew this place. Here, men called Watchers brought people who were . . . dead, and yet not dead. These Watchers . . . they were trying to keep someone from me. I can't remember more . . . but the hall, here, I can remember, clearly."

Owen turned, searching. "There. There'd be a stairway . . . see, you can see the stones where it was. And behind that pile there are doors, hidden. Khitai, I knew the place. I did."

Khitai nodded. "I think so."

"But it is old," Zelza said. "A thousand years old . . . and a ruin. Owen! You said you believed the folk of your dream still live, that it was not merely a memory. Doesn't this show you were wrong?"

Owen gave a long shudder, and sat down on the ground, burying his face in his hands. Zelza put her hand on his shoulder, and they remained, still, for a long time. The skin-wearers edged back to the fire, where they sat, murmuring to each other, watching the newcomers with rabbit-like eyes.

Khitai moved closer to the group, and they shrank back a little from him. But he made more gestures, smiling and nodding as if to fearful children.

"I think they've got food here," Khitai said, his words directed at Owen and Zelza, though he did not look back at them. Owen did not look up.

"Gold," Khitai said, taking a small coin from his belt. "Pretty." He held it up, so that it glittered in the firelight. The eldest-appearing of the others glanced up at it, and grunted, a word that did not sound approving.

"They are very backward folk," Khitai said. "They have no greed for gold. I wonder what else . . ." He sat down beside the elder in a comradely way, grinning widely at him. Then he picked up a twig and began to draw in the grime on the stone floor.

First Khitai made stick figures, indicating the three who came from the outside; and the others, smaller stick forms. He pointed to himself and to Owen and Zelza, and to the stick figures. "Friends," Khitai said. "People. See?"

"Ah," the eldest one said. He tapped himself on the chest. "Fepp." He pointed to each of the others. "Fepp-hoo."

"Fepp-hoo," Khitai repeated, and touched himself. "Khitai." He pointed. "Owen. Zelza."

Now that communication was possible, the tribe of Fepp's people became more than talkative, and Khitai had

all he could do to keep the exchange of words down to a mere torrent. Owen, watching, began to smile.

"A friendly lot, anyway," he commented, at last; one of the naked children was crawling at his feet, staring up at him with big eyes. He looked down at it, and laughed, and it laughed back at him.

"They are apparently shepherds or goatherds, I think," Khitai said. "These are the whole tribe; they seem to know nothing about others nearby, anyway. They wander about, sleeping in ruins or caves. They seem quite innocent, harmless folk."

"They do," Owen said, grim-faced again, and he sighed. "Zelza, I thank you again. But . . . what can I do? This madness . . . it was on me, when we came through that cursed woodland. I felt as if I were drunk, a strangeness . . . I was no longer Owen of Marrdale. If this goes on . . ."

"I saw that coming," Zelza said. "Remember, I have sight."

"You hinted that you could help," Owen said to her. "If I went back to the dream . . ."

"If you saw the dream was of a time gone past, you would hate me for revealing it to you," Zelza said. "Do you still believe it is a living dream, a true vision of this life?"

"I . . . I don't know." He stared at the fire. "It's a great hard thing to ask a man to give up, a thing like that. If you had seen it . . ."

"I can," Zelza said. "If you wish to allow me. If you give consent, I can enter that place, with you, and see for myself."

"Maybe," Owen said. "I must do something to prevent another . . . possession. I'll wake to find I've done something worse."

"I think I've managed to explain the matter of food to these small ones," Khitai said from where he sat on the

other side of the fire. One of the women had produced a haunch of meat which she was trussing to a long green stick, with many shy grins and giggles. A man had dived into the shadows and returned with a leather bottle, which proved to contain something that tasted like a fermented milk. Khitai sampled it, and grinned more broadly than Owen had ever seen him do.

"Like that which I tasted as a child on the plains," he said. "A merry and pleasant folk, these. Ah . . . another?"

The meat, sizzling over the fire, smelled magnificent to Owen. He sat, knees up, and stared into the flames, thinking. After a long while, he fished in the pack he had carried, and found the little harp; laying it on his knee, he began to tighten its strings.

The Fepp chattered animatedly on seeing the harp, and one of the men touched it shyly. Owen grinned back at him, and plucked a string; the little man jumped, terrified.

"No fear, friend," Owen said. He tried another chord. "I remember a tune, from my dream world . . . like this." He began to play, a queer, halting melody that seemed to run up and down from gay to sad chords. It was not like anything Khitai had ever heard him play before, and it was disturbing.

"I think these are words," Owen said, his hand still touching the strings. "But I have forgotten them."

The Fepp seemed upset. One of the women, the one with the child, edged back, away from the fire, and the other made an odd, ritualistic gesture, covering her mouth. Then one of the younger men leaned forward, his eyes curiously wide and empty looking, as if he were drugged. His body was swaying to the tinkling tune, and he began singing in accompaniment.

"He knows words!" Owen said, staring at him.

The skin-wearer began a low, chanting rhyme, in words that did not seem to resemble the language they had

spoken till now. Owen, plucking the strings, played with him.

"*Kee sa, nomani, ah-men, ahseela hoy*," the little man sang. And Owen, as he played, muttered other words: "Where spring is always, never-winter, they walk in sunlight never ending, beside the river of frozen water . . . where the trees are made of stone . . ."

Suddenly the tribe's elder barked a harsh phrase, and clapped a hand across the singer's mouth. The singer blinked and stopped, looking terrified.

Owen lifted his hand from the harp, and stopped playing.

"I think I've done something to affright our small friends, Khitai," he said. "What is it? Why does it make them afraid?"

"I think they have heard something like it, and they . . . maybe they dream, too," Khitai said. "Where did you learn those words?"

"I remembered them, when he sang," Owen said. "Ah . . . enough, enough. We can't be scaring these fine little folk so, not when there's such a tasty joint on the fire. I'll put my harp away."

He opened the flap of the pack, pushing the harp into it; and as he did so, the black box slid forward, a corner showing. Owen glanced down at it, and shoved it back; but the little folk had seen it, too, and were staring with more than simple curiosity.

"Nothing but an old bone," Owen said cheerfully. He thumped the pack with his fist. "See. Just a box. Ah, the meat smells done." He leaned forward, pointing with his small knife, and licking his lips in a broad gesture of hunger.

The little people laughed, forgetting their fears, and began to hack at the joint, passing their visitors strips of the stuff.

"I won't ask what it is," Owen said, through a mouthful,

"Nor maybe who it was." He laughed, and cut another strip to pass to Zelza.

"You seem lightened, red-beard," she said. She took a bite of the meat with sharp white teeth, her black eyes on Owen.

" 'Twas food I needed," he said. "A cut of roast will calm visions of other worlds every time. Ask Khitai here, who fasts every so often, so he may speak with the Sky-bear. And he's sour as a bear himself for a week after. It's food I should take in, girl, not visions. There's nothing like it, unless you add wine."

"And women," Khitai said.

"Don't listen to the yellow-skinned little ascetic, lady," Owen said. "He has no interest in women, only in wisdom."

"There may be wise women, and one could combine pleasures," Khitai said. "True, I have seldom seen any . . ."

"This is a wise woman, here," Owen said.

"But she is not mine," Khitai answered. "A Rom belongs to one or none. True words, lady?"

Zelza smiled, and said nothing.

"Even now," Khitai went on, "This queen of Rom is weaving a new spell. She needs no spoken words, as other warlocks do, nor shouts and knives . . . she is silent, magic enough in a woman. But she is calling certain magic inward. I can smell Rom magic now."

"You are sharp-nosed, yellow man," Zelza said. "And you are right. I do not need to speak my spells aloud."

"What spell, then?" Owen asked.

"Do you wish to search that vision land of yours with me?" Zelza asked.

"Whenever you wish," Owen said. "But I'll take no more of those black berries of Khitai's, here. They do nothing of value, not a second time. I know, I've tried. What way do you have to that world?"

"You will see," Zelza said. "Soon."

"As I said," Owen leaned back, wiping his beard with the back of his hand, "whenever you like."

The naked child was back again, toddling toward Owen, he reached out for the little creature, extending a finger, which the child grasped solemnly. It was a boy, round-eyed and energetic as children anywhere of his age; he studied Owen's clothing, the ax that lay beside him, and seemed particularly fascinated by the red-beard.

The child crowed, and reached for the beard, missed, and fell. The fall did not seem to bother him; he merely transferred his interest to the pack, which he pulled open, reaching in with his tiny hands.

"Oh, no, lad, keep out of it," Owen said, pulling the child away. But the child had found the black box, and was gripping it firmly.

"Muh!' the child said, determined not to release the box. Somehow his fingers had found the hook, and the lid was loose. The child put an inquisitive finger inside, and snatched it out again, with a loud wail. Owen swiftly shoved the hook back into place, and dropped the box onto the pack; the child had scrambled away, now, and his mother was busy trying to comfort him.

"I think . . . he was bitten," Owen said, in a low voice to Khitai.

"I think you're right." Khitai moved casually toward the child, and glanced down at it. "Yes. A small bite, on his hand."

"This damned box," Owen muttered. "Maybe we'd be better off if we buried it."

"It was the bargain you made," Khitai told him. "And I do not think Myrdin Velis' power would end so. One must keep such bargains."

One of the Fepp moved over to look at the box, his brows knit in puzzlement. He trapped it with the handle

of the crude stone knife he had used to eat with, and glanced up at Owen, uttering a questioning sound.

Owen shrugged eloquently at him.

"I hope he thinks his child caught the finger on a nail," Owen said, smiling at the little man as he spoke.

The man leaned over the box again, tracing the odd carving with a finger. Abruptly, he called out in his own tongue. One of the others came over, and then the older one; all three hung over the black box, discussing it in guttural tones.

"I think they dislike it, Owen," Khitai said. "Be careful."

One of the men walked away slowly and spoke to the women. The group drew together at one end of the hall, near the door, and the chief Fepp, the elder, stood a little in advance of them, as if defending his people.

He lifted an arm, his face solemn.

He spoke, at length, a series of rumbling sentences that clearly expressed anger, fear, and rejection. In his voice was a curious tone, like that of a priest who ritually exorcises an evil spirit. Then, backing slowly, the whole group moved out into the darkness; the women behind the men, not taking their eyes off their visitors for a moment. They moved back, into the shadows, and out of sight.

"They didn't care for our company," Owen said, looking out after them. "Or for this one's company, maybe." He glanced down at the box. "You're losing us friends at a great rate, whatever you are. First a crew, and now these wee folk." Owen rapped the box hard with his knuckles. "And you're not what I'd pick as company for a dark night, whatever."

The box made no answer. Zelza laughed, a cool sound.

"The warlock's skull speaks to no one," she observed. "I doubt he would have much to say you'd care for, if he did speak."

"Back in the bag you go, then," Owen said. "Now, then. I doubt our little friends will try to knife us in the dark, but let me fling another stick on that fire. Zelza . . . you said you had a way to open that dream for me. Tell me now. How, and when?"

"Now, if you wish," she said. "And how? A magic key, which I have. You need not understand it."

"What must I do?"

"Sit opposite me, so. Comfortably, thus. I take your hands—little yellow man, sit by the door and guard; we shall seem to sleep for a time. But if you cry out loudly, we can come back to ourselves very quicly." Zelza fixed her eyes on Owen's as she spoke. Her strong hands held his wrists, pressing in an odd grip, thumbs against the veins.

"We shall seem to be gone for a long time, but there are many kinds of time . . . here, only a few minutes may pass at most." Owen, looking into the black, huge pools of her eyes, could hear her voice only faintly, as if it came from far away. "We go, there, and we shall see . . ."

X

You lied, Rom. Owen said the words, but discovered that there seemed to be no real sound, only somehow the words silently *there.*

I did not lie. This is the place of your dream, but you are not now caught in it, like a fly in a web; you move through it freely. Look, and see.

Owen saw the same curious landscape as that of his dream; trees shining with a jewel-like gleam, more like emeralds than like green leaves. Among the trees, white houses, walls, and paths, a place like a garden. Near it, a river which seemed to lie glassy-still, motionless under a warm sunlight. The sunlight seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere; he could see no sun.

On the paths, figures moved, men, and women, all handsome, robed, and silently smiling. Their feet seemed to make no sound, and they said nothing to each other as they passed on unknown errands to and fro.

Before, Owen had been one of them. He had walked here, in a part of the dream. He had been called by another name which he could not remember now. And she had been there, too, he remembered. Somewhere, among the white buildings, she was there now.

But Zelza's soundless voice whispered in his ear: Go and look.

He moved, floating, through the trees . . . the *stone* trees, he saw, the trees of song. And ahead, he saw himself. He knew the man who walked there, along this path; it was the man he had been in the dream. And the man walked toward the white gate, just ahead, and entered.

Inside, there was a great room with a high ceiling, full of the same directionless warm light. Suddenly, Owen noticed the floor, with a shock; the pattern was the same, the same twisting eye-straining form that had been in the house of Myrdin Velis. The room itself seemed somehow like that room.

There was a low couch of shining black stone, and on it a woman lay, robed in white. She sat up as the man came toward her, and extended her hands toward him, in greeting. But they said nothing at all. The woman rose, and Owen knew her name.

Rhynel, his thought said.

And your name was Ain.

He could not tell if the words had come from himself or from Zelza. The dream was different, not the same as it had been when he had first had it. Now he merely looked on, but before he had *been* Ain. He remembered the strange joy, like a black fire in the blood, that had seemed to possess him, or that possessed Ain . . . if he were not Ain. Here, these people moved as he remembered them, but he felt nothing of what they felt. Only in memory . . .

In memory. To walk here, in the Place, had been to walk in a constant flame that sang through the body and danced in the sight. This joy . . . this was what he could not explain to Khitai, to Zelza, not to any human who had not experienced it.

Floating here, he and Zelza were somehow becoming one, as if they were blending into a single person with two voices. It was not the fire-pleasure of the Place, but it was

good, Owen thought. And heard the echoing thought . . . it is good.

Look at Rhynel and Ain. You did not understand then. Now, you will see.

The two, the man and the woman, were moving through the white-lit room, along the queer, twisting patterns in the floor, as if they followed an intricate dance or a mapped road.

Now the room itself seemed to flicker, and the outlines of wall and column faded; the light remained, strong and bright, and the figures of the two who walked together, through the maze on the floor—though the floor itself was no longer there, Owen saw.

Now taking shape around the two figures was a street, a wide paved way, with tall stepped buildings on all sides, and masses of plants that seemed to be growing on each of the rising levels. On either side were great arched doorways and carved walls, and a vista of fountained squares that seemed to stretch for leagues ahead down the street.

The two figures of Ain and Rhynel stood immobile in the street, the warm bright light pouring down around them. The light seemed centered on the two of them, though the whole street was filled with it, on all sides. Then Owen noticed two odd things.

First, there were no living people visible anywhere, though he could see far in either direction down the street. So great a city, as it must be . . . and no one at all.

The second thing was the black sky, studded with bright stars, that overlay all. The warm sunlight was there . . . but the sky was the sky of night.

It is night. That is why there is no one awake in this city. Zelza's whispered thought came to him.

Night, and the sunlight too, he thought.

I don't think the light comes from any sun, she said. Look, there. Someone else comes.

A dark figure in contrast to the two white-robed ones

who stood waiting, came into sight far down the street; he seemed to have emerged from a doorway. Now he came slowly, one hand touching the walls along the street from time to time, like a blind man. In his other hand, he held a thick, smoking object.

He came closer, and Owen saw now, and wondered at it; the thing in his hand was a lighted torch. In the strange sunlight, the torch flame seemed almost a darker spot, and yet the oncoming man seemed to need its light.

He was a small, dark man, clean-shaven. He came fumbling on, and Owen began to realize now that the street for him was night-dark, the torch his only light. And, in his face, Owen read abject terror. He was afraid, and more than afraid. As he came, he mumbled what sounded like an incantation, and his face shone with sweat.

I know him, Owen thought. His name is Vaiya. I knew him well . . . a scribe, I think.

Now, the two silent figures of Ain and Rhynel turned, together, like dancers, and flanked the man called Vaija, moving beside him as he walked. He could not see them!

But somehow he felt them. He stopped, and glanced behind him, then moved, more falteringly, onward. He touched his throat, where a heavy golden amulet hung.

The two silent white figures suddenly drew closer, and now they touched Vaija. He stopped, and staggered; dropped the torch, which went out, and fell to the stones.

The two white figures bent over him, and stood so, for a moment, in a strange parody of concerned aid for a fallen man. But they were not helping him.

Then, the two straightened again, and now the odd light seemed hotter and brighter, and there was a singing sound in Owen's mental ear. But the man called Vaija was dead.

The figures of Ain and Rhynel drifted away like growing columns of smoke, and the vision of Owen followed them as if drawn by a magnet. They moved toward an iron barred gate in a high wall, and somehow they moved

through it, impalpably. They were in a dark passage between buildings, a narrow alley, and then a street; this street was a grimy, cobbled gulley between buildings that were obviously tenements. On nearly every door, strange chalked marks were drawn, bunches of herbs, and amulets of stone and metal; every lower window was barred heavily and shuttered with wooden planks.

But neither Ain nor Rhynel seemed to be hindered by what might have been magical defenses against them. Silently, they passed through a charm-enscribed door, and Rhynel's mouth was opened in a silent laugh as she glanced at the ineffective defenses. Still, Owen's compelled vision followed them into a dark room, where three children lay huddled together, sleeping. And now, the deadly touch came again.

They are dead, too, Zelza's thought came. Now do you begin to understand?

I cannot understand, Owen answered. I am both myself and the man Ain. In a dream, I lived there, in that Place, once, and here, in this city, and Rhynel was mine. These things I see now are lies, they must be lies.

Another time, then, Zelza said.

Now the two white figures were gone, and the ancient slum vanished; the city seemed to be awake, in real sunlight and not the directionless glow of the Place. In a confused flickering, Owen saw busy streets, workmen and merchants and warriors, a flash of blue sea beyond the city walls and the masts and sails of ships. And then he saw Ain again: not robed in white now but in scarlet, a great golden chain around his neck, with white-plumed warriors walking behind him like a royal guard.

Ain seemed to walk now like a man, not a spirit; his face was younger, and no longer smooth and calm, but filled with a strong life. Behind him, standing on what seemed to be a kind of terrace, Owen could see the woman Rhynel, watching; she too seemed younger, and different.

Ain was standing on a stone wharf, looking down into rippling water; and he seemed to be speaking with someone, as if below, under the water, a human face looked up, speaking in return.

The scene faded, and now Ain walked in a columned hall, speaking with an ancient man in a dark robe; beside him, a younger man walked, smiling as he listened. It was not a pleasant smile. And the young, smooth, ageless face, cruelly smiling, was the face of Myrdin Velis.

Now the vision began to become more and more confused; times and places blending into each other without continuity or sense. There was a great city, and Ain was a noble, a chief of some kind; Rhynel too, in some way, seemed to be among the ruling class of the place. But the city was dying, in a way that Owen could not comprehend. As he watched, houses seemed to fall into ruin, the streets became overgrown with weeds, and the road that led out of the city was first clogged with refugees, and then, at last, empty.

Toward the end, there seemed to be a few who remained in the city, but they were a ragged, poor remnant, who seemed to skulk fearfully among the ancient buildings. The place seemed to grow immeasurably older, as Owen watched.

Now he seemed to be farther away, watching the city from a distant hilltop. It was night, and starlight showed only the glitter of the sea and the black outlines of the walls and buildings. And another light . . . the same hot, directionless glare of the Place, a sunlight without a sun, came up among the ruined buildings, and the night city glowed feverishly. It might have been burning, but nothing was consumed.

And at last, Owen's vision showed him the Place again, and it was just as it had been before. The stone trees and the white buildings still stood beside the glassy river; the silent folk of the Place still drifted quietly along the wind-

ing paths on their eternal errands. Ain was there, and Rhynel, unchanged, walking together.

And suddenly, a new mental voice entered the dream, a clear, ringing voice, that seemed to echo down some mile-long well into Owen's mind.

This is my house, the voice said. See, and remember it well.

A white house, open to the eternal light; and within it, a green stone, the height of a man, standing shadowless on a smooth floor . . . a pillar of stone that flickered greenly as Owen watched, knowing it for the place he had bound himself to find. The house of Myrdin Velis . . .

Go now, small creatures, and serve my will . . . the voice of the warlock came again. Go, and be not too curious again concerning my affairs . . .

XI

Owen found himself still sitting in the same position, opposite Zelza. Her eyes were wide open, with an expression of blank terror in them; her face was chalk-white, and damp with perspiration.

"*He* . . ." she said, in a harsh whisper, her eyes fixed on Owen's face. "He saw! He was there too."

"Myrdin Velis," Owen said, blinking furiously. His eyes hurt as if he had been staring at the sun. He rubbed a hand over them, and stood up, swaying a little. "The damned he-witch is less dead than any set of bones I've ever met. What are you staring at, Khitai? How long was I gone?"

"Gone?" Khitai looked confused. "You sat there but as long as an eye-blink or two, friend Owen. What troubles you?"

"Did you see all I saw, Zelza?" Owen demanded. She nodded, and silently put her face in her hands.

"It was the place of my first dream," Owen said to Khitai, "But damnably changed. I couldn't explain to you, afterward, what there was about that place. It drew me, it made me feel . . . ah, as if there were no joy in ordinary life by comparison. How can I tell you? I couldn't, not

then . . . not now. But this time, I saw more. Too much, I think. Khitai, there is a place where human beings seem to live by draining the lives of others . . . where they seem to be both ghosts and living at the same time . . . killing children. For some reason, killing children. Khitai, I cannot understand any of this."

"Khitai," Zelza said, lifting her face from her hands, "have you ever heard of . . . Vrykol?"

Khitai made a swift gesture, his face paling.

"Even far in the east, the word is known," he said.

"We have heard of it, among the Rom," she said. "In thought . . . this vision of Owen's was only a faint memory, of another life of long ago among the people who lived far to the west. I was wrong. Khitai, we Rom know some of the oldest legends of man; where men came from . . . all the ancient worlds that have come and gone. We . . . we always went on. Always ourselves, because we took no part."

Khitai nodded. "I have found a little of the story, in one ancient book and another."

"It is said that once, long ago, there were evil folk who were called Vrykol," Zelza said. "Because of them, and because of the black sorcery which they did, the tribes of man fled away from them, escaping toward the east. The tale is that all this took place thousands of years ago, and that these Vrykol are all dead now . . . although they lived longer than they had any right to."

"Among my tribes," Khitai said, "we call one who is accursed in a certain way Vrykol-akka—bitten by Vrykol. Sometimes, a man becomes Vrykol, and when a wizard of our people finds this, we kill the Vrykol, at once, by burning."

"And how do you know when someone is, what do you call it . . . Vrykol?" Owen asked, fascinated, but with a strange feeling of familiar terror. That word seemed . . . as if he had heard it.

Khitai stared at him, his sallow face miserable. "Owen . . . my friend . . . when he relates a dream . . . of a place . . . such as you have described. When he seems to be hungry for a food he cannot name, for a vision he cannot tell . . . when he is known to be able to see in darkness . . . these are signs, known to the wizards of the plains folk. I was taught that the Vrykol blood is not dead; that it rises again, sometimes, and Vrykol are born among men . . . and that they must be slain."

Owen stared back at him, beginning at last to understand Khitai's and Zelza's strange looks.

"And you think . . . you think I'm . . ." Abruptly he laughed, loudly, but with little mirth. "Come now! You are my friends, both of you, and you're ready to fry me like a hen if I'm this monster Vrykol you believe in?"

"Your dream," Khitai said. "It would seem that you dreamed of having been one of the Vrykol, the first time."

"But the second dream," Zelza interrupted. "I was with him. He was not the one he saw, the one called Ain. He shared that one's thoughts, that was all . . ."

"He may have been Ain, in a former life," Khitai countered. "Once Vrykol, never can a man be free of it again."

"Enough!" Owen glared at Khitai. "You've been with me through half the world, you yellow monkey! If you think I'm a night monster, why haven't I drained your shriveled carcase a dozen times before now?"

"No, no!" Zelza broke in. "Khitai . . . you don't believe such a thing. It's not that Owen is . . . this thing. But somewhere, a Vrykol . . . a *living* Vrykol, if such a thing can be . . . speaks to Owen's mind, in the vision he had. Something calls to him . . . it must need him to aid it in some way!"

"Luka only knows how I'm to assist some creeping night thing that sends me visions of a paradise I can't have." Owen said, sitting down. He groaned. "I'm worse off than before! I thought I'd see that place I dreamed of . . .

now, it's naught but some hellish drug-vision, and may never have existed at all."

"I think the place you saw exists truly," Zelza said. "Now that I've had time to think a moment . . . Khitai, stop glowering and fingering your magic beads. Think of this for a moment: the warlock Myrdin Velis was there, in the vision—both as one of the people, and as a voice that came to us. The place to which we are to bring his skull . . . that was there, too."

"The pillar of green stone . . ." Owen said.

"The warlock may have created the whole vision, to gain Owen's services. Or he may have hidden other true things under a veil of false images. We cannot know. But I cannot believe Owen is . . . anything but Owen," Zelza finished.

"Nor can I," Khitai said, shamefaced. "I . . . I am sorry, friend. But the fear of Vrykol is very great with my people."

"There's one way to tell," Owen said, grimly. "The only way. We've no choice, in any case. We must go on, till we've put the warlock's damned skull on the post it wants to sit on. He swore to me—warlock's oaths, Luka knows—but he swore he'd free me from the vision. And Zelza, I think you've done it, anyway. I can no longer feel that sense of being drawn . . . but Myrdin Velis promised it. Look you, I made a promise to the warlock, and he to me. I don't fear him . . ." And Owen grinned wryly. "Ah, well, I do fear him, then, but I won't break my given word because of that. I will complete the task I promised him. I'll put his skull where it wants to go."

"I mind me of another thing," Khitai said, staring into the fire. "He promised to lift the pursuit of the hound that nearly slew us both: this he did. And if we break our word, we may find that hound returns to our track, and none to aid us. True, Owen, we have no choice."

"I cannot go where this man is not," Zelza said quietly. "And therefore, I have no choice either."

Owen looked up, into her eyes. He felt now a strange stirring within him. The image of Rhynel, a woman made of dream-stuff, had faded more than a little. He could not see Rhynel as a living woman, now, as he had. She had become a phantom . . . and Zelza was warm, and living.

Owen's gaze remained on her, and she abruptly dropped her eyes; it was the first time she had not been able to meet his look squarely, he suddenly realized.

"Have you changed suddenly, or have I?" Owen asked quietly.

"You have shared a ghost-ride with her." Khitai said. "And she is a witch, though not an evil one. You are bound now."

"Ha!" Owen snorted. He continued to stare at Zelza. "I'll be bound to no woman. But you, Rom . . . you're no ordinary female creature. That I'll give you."

He threw another stick of wood on the fire, pulled his cloak around himself, and lay down.

"I need no more dreams tonight," he grunted from under his cloak. "Get some sleep; we'll make haste tomorrow."

XII

The sun was already well up when the three travelers emerged from the ruined hall into the light. Owen was silent, frowning over his thoughts, as he led the way out across the empty land, walking with long strides along the ancient road. Khitai too was wrapped in thought, and Zelza alone seemed remarkably cheerful. Her new mood made her step light, and she smiled quietly, watching Owen's broad back ahead of her.

Khitai glanced at her as they walked, and then at Owen.

"A woman wise in many things may be fool in one," he observed, looking ahead toward the nearing mountains.

Zelza's smile was completely guileless.

"Walking has never been my favorite means of travel," Owen said glumly. His steady pace was carrying him along well enough, in spite of his opinion. But he was not in a cheerful mood.

"We may find a horse to steal," Khitai said. "We've found them often enough before this."

"Um." Owen continued to stride along.

"I see horses!" Zelza said suddenly.

The road had begun to slant upward, and they were now definitely on the lower slopes of the mountain range. Ahead, the pass was a V-shaped notch, and the shadow of the mountain fell on either side. Against the bright sky, far ahead, there were minute dark specks on the ridge, and Zelza was right. Beasts and riders they were, and coming down toward them.

"Ho!" Owen unslung his ax and stood ready.

"Horses you asked for, and here they are," Khitai remarked, laying an arrow on the cord. "Now, all we need do is slay their riders, and we may mount ourselves."

"Bloodthirsty small man," Zelza said, "be careful. They may be too many for us. Wait."

"Not horses at all, see," Owen said, leaning on the ax, shading his eyes with a hand. "Whatever they ride, it has the look of a great sheep, all wooly. And the neck of a snake, I'd think. One, two, three . . . I count nine of them, and three . . . no, four more of the beasts, unridden behind. Armor on them, I think . . . no, maybe not. Pointed caps, and sticks . . . maybe more herdsmen like our night's guests."

"Let's try not to frighten these off," Khitai suggested, "since they seem to have spare mounts, and I too have weary feet."

"We'll keep our friend in his safe place, in his box," Owen replied.

The riders drew closer, and evidently saw the three clearly themselves. But they showed neither fear nor surprise as they came on steadily down the long slope. They were robed and cloaked in a heavy dark stuff, with short pointed caps on their heads as Owen had seen; each carried a long staff, which might be either tool or weapon, or both. But they seemed otherwise unarmed.

The beasts themselves were smaller than horses, with thick woolly coats and long necks; they trotted well enough, though their riders' feet nearly touched the

ground. Now, as the riders came up, the little beasts gazed at the three with great dark eyes, weirdly intelligent in their look, as if surveying them.

The first rider pulled up and dismounted. He came toward Owen, walking confidently, and held up his hand; his shaven face was very brown, as if he were constantly in sun, but he seemed an ordinary man in all ways. He smiled, and spoke, very slowly and haltingly.

"I . . . am told . . . you come, yes. Us, with."

"You speak our language?" Owen asked, surprised. But the rider shook his head.

"No, no. Not. Speak only, what sent say. Not good speak. You come. We not hurt."

Owen glanced at the others.

"No reason not to go along, is there?" He turned back to look at the nine riders carefully. As he had thought, they were not armed, unless you counted the staves. Their expressions were bland, almost uninterested, but certainly not hostile.

"I'd like to know how they knew we were coming," Owen said.

"They must have someone with them who speaks the western languages also," Khitai said. "Not this man. He has been told how to put his words, I think."

"If they wished to kill us, it would have been easy enough to attack," Zelza observed. "Let me mount one of these little beasts . . ." She walked to one of them, and swung into the saddle effortlessly. The beast's head swung back on its long neck, teeth shining, and it snapped, unsuccessfully, at her ankle. She grinned, and rapped it firmly on the nose with a closed fist. The beast emitted a pained grunt, and faced forward again.

"Ahai, ha!" A rider, watching, grinned broadly, and dug another rider in the ribs with his staff, calling his attention to the strange female who could thus easily mount their steeds. The others chuckled.

"Beware their chops, Khitai," Owen said, and grasped a woolly beast's saddlehorn, reversing the ax in his hand as he swung up. The expected snap of teeth was met with a thump which brought another pained grunt, and another chorus of approving chuckles.

Khitai was prepared for bites, too, but his mount had evidently learned from observing the others. The woolly beast merely groaned, rolled its enormous eyes, and contained its feelings otherwise.

"Yuh," The leading rider said, laughing. "This . . . call ulla. It . . . bad animal. Huh . . ." He gave up and relapsed into another language, for a sentence which put the other eight riders into a state of high good humor. Then he barked a word which started the whole party off at a swaying trot, back up the hill.

XIII

The road, less and less a road than a path, led up toward the bare ridges; up among toothed crags, it was now barely wide enough for one woolly little ulla and rider at a time, the beast stepping delicately as a dancer along the ledges. The guides seemed quite untroubled by the gaping canyons that opened under them; Owen found that he preferred not to look downward too often.

Then, just around another flat-walled crag, a small valley opened out. It was a green cup of grass and trees, shadowed by the crags overhead, and blocked at the farther end by a towering mass of black stone . . . not another crag, Owen saw now, but a fortress.

It was not a homelike-looking place, he thought. It had been built for hard use, by men whose ideas had been safety, not comfort. Its shining black walls sloped upward nearly ten men's lengths; it was topped by a single round, squat black tower half again as high as the walls. High in the walls there were arrowslits and a toothed line of embrasures, but there were no windows. And as they approached closer, through the green field, Owen could see that the fortress stood on a separate stone pinnacle of its own, with a deep crevasse all around its base. The only

entrance was a low arch, facing them, and a narrow wooden bridge led to it; but the door in the arch, apparently also of black stone, was swung ajar as if in welcome.

The little valley seemed uninhabited; several of the ullas were grazing under the trees, and their saddle animals greeted the others with a high whickering noise as they passed. But there seemed to be no other visible people about.

They rode in through the arch and stopped in a courtyard in the shadows within, like the bottom of a great well. The silent tower overhead loomed against the sky, and the windowless walls surrounded them.

The guides began to dismount and unsaddle the beasts; the leader of the group approached Owen and his two friends, still smiling and extending his hands outward.

"You, please, waiting, yes," he said, bobbing his head. "We taking away ullas. Master come talk you." He jerked a thumb toward the tower behind him.

"Yes," Owen said, nodding to the man. Then, to the others, "I hope we've better speech from his master than from this one."

"Well." Khitai stared about him. "We're still traveling in the proper direction, friend Owen, even after this ride. The sun tells me that. Perhaps we may gain food and a mount apiece, if we speak the same tongues as this master he mentioned."

"Ai!" Zelza smiled. "A pair of proper vagabonds, now, aren't you? You'll both be Rom before long. Foodless and horseless, and with a few good words, we may yet be a whole caravan of our own. Shall I tell this mountain master's fortune for him, red-beard, while our small friend here steals his kitchen bare?"

A voice came from the shadows, deep and ringing, in their own language.

"Nay, lady, I know my own future well enough."

The man who came out into the courtyard toward them was smiling as he spoke.

He was an enormously tall and thin man, like a long shadow; and he was evidently very old, although it would have been very hard to give his term in years, since he still seemed straight and strong. But his face was like brown earth, dried in the sun; a dense net of wrinkles covered it, and his eyebrows were a startling white against the brown. He was quite bald, and had no beard. He wore a baggy robe of a coarse dark blue material, with a hood, and a heavy belt from which hung a scabbarded broadsword.

"I am Hurgin, of the Brotherhood," he said, extending his hand. "And this is Eman-Amma, the place called the Broken Key in the ancient tongue. Welcome, travelers, and my sorrow to say to you that you may go no farther."

Owen grasped his hand and glanced at Khitai meaningfully. It might be well to be as diplomatic as possible.

"I am Owen of Marrdale, and this is Khitai, and the lady Zelza. And as for going farther—well, we have come a long way on an errand, and if we're to turn back, should we not know more?"

The tall man stood silently, looking at him for a while. Then, he nodded again.

"You should know all, true. But come within." He turned, and passed ahead of them through a doorway; they followed him into the huge tower.

The place was even larger than it looked. The lower floor was like a giant cavern, arched and shadowy; streaks of light from high slits seemed barely to dent the gloom.

All around the enormous inner space of the tower, strange shrouded shapes were ranged against the walls; covered with moldering sheets of canvas and drifted with dust, the shapes looked like crouching beasts of hunched

giants. What they actually were, Owen could not guess.

A spiraling stair went up, and as they mounted, another ancient man in a blue robe descended toward them. He might have been Hurgin's twin, except that he wore no sword. They passed on the stair, silently; Hurgin made a gesture, touching his forehead with his left hand, and the other did so too. At the top of the stair, they passed still another of the same look, and the gesture was exchanged again.

They passed through bare stone halls, up, and up again, to the top; there, in a sunlit room, there were chairs and a table, on which there was a pan of bread, a jar, and a plate. Hurgin sat down, and gestured the others to chairs, while he cut a portion of the loaf and drew it toward him.

"I must apologize," Hurgin said. "You came very early, in a way. Our good riders saw you yesterday, but we had not hoped you would walk so swiftly along the ancient road. So, I was still at my meal when you were brought this far." He bit into the bread, smiling at them. "We eat very simply, we of the Brotherhood. However, better food is being prepared for you, and will soon be here."

"Most kind, good sir," Owen said. "But—"

"Of course, there will be more than enough to help you well along on your return journey," Hurgin went on. "And the gentlest of our ullas . . . we can spare all this. We have good stores in our houses, and as for the beasts—when you have no more need of them, you may release them and they will come back here, no matter how far a journey it is. Such is their nature."

Owen found it difficult to decide if the bland assurance that Hurgin showed was a mask or reality. He seemed some how quite certain that they would go no further—why?"

"Since you are lord of these parts, sir," Owen began.

"Oh, no," Hurgin corrected him. "I am only master in this house, and we own no property in any way ourselves. We are a . . . a kind of religious order." He smiled.

"May we ask this, then?" Owen leaned forward. "Why, asking pardon, should we *not* go on? Do your laws forbid it? Are we trespassing on some holy place?"

Hurgin shook his head, and his eyes seemed a little sad. "No . . . no." He looked at them. "Strange. You do not seem quite like most of the folk I see from your eastern lands. Generally, such as come this far are of a different kind . . . I learned your language from one, a wise traveler who came for a very different reason than the others. He only sought to draw maps. After many months here, he . . . he ceased to be wise, and went on." Hurgin shook his head. "Well, folk who come this way for the usual reason soon learn better and turn back. You are the first for many years."

"The usual reason, sir?" Khitai asked.

"Gold, of course," Hurgin turned to him, looking surprised. "Was it not so? You found, somewhere, possibly an ancient map, or an old traveler's tale. You heard of a mine of vast wealth, on the shore of the Old Sea, beyond here; or of a place where there were many empty halls and palaces, all roofed with gold. Some such tale as that, I imagine."

"Someone did mention a little matter of gold, just once." Khitai said, half to himself; then, to Hurgin, "But we had other cause for coming so far. A strange tale, having to do with a wizard who required it of us . . . as a repayment for his services."

Owen glanced at Khitai warningly. He felt, somehow, that he would like to know more before telling more.

"Lord Hurgin," Owen said, "is there then no gold beyond here to be had?"

Hurgin shook his head. "Not enough," he said. "Oh, perhaps a few ornaments and jewels may be found in the

old places. What could be carried away has been carried away ages ago, when it was easier. Though the stories of wealth persist, of course, and there are those who do not mind such bait to trap new blood."

"Blood," Khitai said thoughtfully, and Zelza echoed him. "Blood?"

"I did not use the word as a figure of speech," Hurgin said gently. He glanced at them in turn. "Well, I must tell you a little more. But first: if you wish to go on, you go to doom. We will not stop you. But we will slay you if you come back to this place, from . . . from there."

"I see," Owen said. There may have been a tone of question in his voice, because Hurgin looked at him, and at the ax he carried, and shook his head.

"No, Owen of Marrdale. You are certainly a brave and skillful man of war, and we are a brotherhood of peace. But you would most certainly die. Not a year passes but that some come up the western range of the mountains toward the great pass, or try to come through the higher passes. One, or ten, or a hundred . . . it would make no difference, although, being as they are, like wolves, they trust each other too little to run in more than twos and threes. But even they are mortal . . . in some ways. The ulla-riders are armed with arrows with silver heads."

"Silver heads?" Owen asked, and a sudden look of comprehension and fear began to show in Khitai's and Zelza's faces.

"Silver slays a Vrykol," Zelza said, in a low voice.

Hurgin looked sharply at her. "You know that word? Then perhaps you know even more." He looked at the others.

"We know very little," Owen said, placatingly. "We are simple travelers. True, we'd be as pleased as any would be, should we find some small wealth, but our journey was for another reason, good sir, and believe me, if

it were my choice, I'd abandon it now. But we must continue, I think."

"You must." Hurgin lifted a white eyebrow. "Well . . . know the rest, then. It is a long and evil tale, and I must shorten it, so you may hasten to your deaths all the more swiftly."

He leaned back, rubbing his chin with the back of his hand.

"We who are called the Brotherhood are the last of a band of priests, pledged to pursue wisdom and serve our holy faith. Once, a long time ago, we lived with the people who held the land on the sea coast, to the west, the sea called the Old Sea. These were a very ancient, wise, people, very strong, very many. Among them were many kinds of wisdom; there were great doctors of the sick, great builders of work; even some who could speak to the sea-folk in their own tongue, or other, stranger things." He looked down and sighed, studying his withered brown hands.

"There was even a way of keeping death itself at bay . . . for long, long years, longer than you would imagine," Hurgin said, softly. "For these folk were greatly afraid of dying. Life was very pleasant for them, and it was hard to leave. And with all their wisdom, no one could say for certain what came after death."

Khitai smiled thinly. "And I only a hedge wizard, know what they knew not," he said. Hurgin looked at him.

"Are you sure?" Hurgin asked, smiling. "I know what you believe, yellow man. Many, many lives, again and again . . . one of your folk came here once. He was wiser than you are. He remained with us."

Hurgin spread out his hands. "In any case, those folk could not believe anything they did not see with their own eyes. Ultimately, they found a way around death, and it was their damnation."

He took a deep breath and closed his eyes. "This is what happened. It is not pleasant to hear, and less to tell, but it is truth. I have said that these folk found a way around death. It was a way open to only a very few. It meant that a few, men and women of power, could become what you call Vrykol. Their bodies lived on, sometimes sleeping, sometimes at night able to move like human flesh. But their . . . doubles . . . a new strange shape of humanity . . . could live and bathe in an eternal cold fire of ecstasy, in a kind of land of death-in-life. They had become in a way immortal, beyond death."

"That Place of the cold fire . . ." Owen said. "Where there seems to be sunlight, and yet there is no sun. A place where there are trees of stone and a river of glass . . ."

Hurgin stiffened, and his ancient eyes became riveted on Owen's.

"Have you seen that place?" Hurgin asked, in a cold voice.

"It has been . . . told to me," Owen said, harshly, and bit his lip. "Go on."

"There was a price for this life," Hurgin said. "The price was human life. At least one human life every day, absorbed to feed this new kind of life. Daily murder; feeding, like wolves, on human life. But even that did not seem evil to these; they were nobles and powerful. Peasants, slaves, common folk . . . such lived to serve them, and might as well die to serve, too. Then, in the great days of empire, there were always prisoners and slaves. I said that this was a very strong nation, there on the shore of the Old Sea."

Zelza was pale and shuddering.

"A life like that." She spoke in a low, shaken voice, remembering what she herself had seen. "The blood of children . . ."

"Children, old men, young, any at all," Hurgin said.

"I cannot blame you, lady, for your horror. Others felt so, too. We, our founders, felt so. Many struggled against this thing. There were wars, civil wars within the kingdom, long and bitter. Many served the Vrykol masters out of fear, out of hope of admission to that deadly paradise . . . and they were strong in magic, and wise in war. But all the outlying folk rose against them, and the last great war destroyed all, all except their city itself, which they held to the end. Which, in a way, they still hold."

"The . . . the Vrykol still live, then?" Owen asked.

"The city still exists," Hurgin said. "Hollow, and empty as a skull. The palaces and gardens are still there. The living, who still serve the Vrykol, they too still dwell there, as their slaves—and ultimately as their food. Some, like you, are fools who came so far after myths of wealth. And there are many who were still loyal, even at the end. Human ways are sometimes strange; men will go on serving even such masters as those rather than leave their root places."

"And you, your Brotherhood?" Owen asked.

"We are called Watchers by some," Hurgin said, and as the word came, Owen felt a cold chill of recognition, a sudden, suppressed fury from another mind, somewhere within him. The Watchers. The enemy.

"Once, the Brotherhood had several public functions in the kingdom. We were doctors, in part. We healed the sick, and one of our tasks had to do with ceremonies held over the dead. Then, we discovered how to guard our patients against the death that came swiftly by night, the Vrykol death. We found defenses . . . not perfect, but of help. And we found that if we took the body of one who was about to become Vrykol, and watched over it, for a time; allowing the sun to touch it, at the right time . . . then, true death came. The Vrykol died . . . unborn, as a Vrykol. Thus we became called Watchers,

and we did this, again and again. Though nothing could stop those who were already Vrykol, we saved many."

"I do not entirely understand," Khitai broke in. "First, evil as the needed food was . . . were these folk immortal without it? Could they not die, if starved?"

"What becomes of a Vrykol, unfed, is worse than death. The shadow body dies, and the Vrykol lives on, immortal, but chained to the paralyzed, decaying shell of mortal flesh. And that fire which once was joy becomes a true fire of unending pain." Hurgin's face was severe. "Many who became Vrykol did not know what was to come. We know, now; we learned, that it was better that a loved friend die than live this. Even if death were indeed an end, a complete end, forever . . . death was better."

"And this matter of silver weapons . . ."

"If silver pierces either the true body or the shadow body, the shadow always dies, and the result is the same. But the Vrykol cannot feed, or move, or slay, without the shadow body, which dwells always in that place I spoke of."

"This is truly a terrifying tale," Owen said, pulling at his beard and studying Hurgin's face thoughtfully. "Then, if we go on toward that sea, you believe we may become what you call Vrykol?"

"If you returned this way, we would know that you carried that infection somehow," Hurgin said. "Either you would have become Vrykol, or some trick of theirs would be with you to aid their ultimate escape from their place. Because we know, now, that this is their great desire. You see, they are becoming very hungry."

The last sentence hung in the sunny room, like a cold mist. Hurgin went on.

"Their reserves of human food grow very low, even carefully managed. We know that no more than a few thousands still live, scattered folk around the city and in it. And such poor creatures do not increase in numbers,

not rapidly enough. Would you have children willingly, if only one of ten were allowed to live?"

"Luka defend us!" Owen paled a little at the thought, and Zelza looked sickened. "Even children . . ."

"I believe they value children as farmers value young and tender animals," Hurgin said, brutally. "Listen, now, to a small further horror. The Vrykol needs naught of a human but the life in him, leaving the flesh. Conserving as they are, they have taught their slaves to waste nothing, not even the husks of their own children. It feeds the slave folk, and costs the Vrykol nothing, you understand."

There was another long silence. Then Owen spoke. "Master Hurgin, this is a very terrible thing. But . . . believe me when I say to you that we seek no treasure. We have a great and sufficient reason to go down into that hell kingdom you tell of. If we cannot return this way, well enough; there is a sea, and the world is wide; one sea may lead to another, and we may try that way home. Or we may leave our bones there, if you cannot tell us how to reach the shore and come out alive . . . and our true selves."

Hurgin seemed to bend, wearily, where he sat, and his eyes dimmed a little.

"I thought . . . I could persuade you." He shrugged. "I am committed against harm to mankind, even to preventing them from harming themselves. But, if you must go . . ."

"What must we do to defend ourselves?"

"Weapons will be of little use, man," Hurgin said. "The slave folk do not fear death at your hands, and they can take your weapons from you if they wish. The others will take your life, in any case, before you spend a single night in that place. What we know, we will give you; but the kind of works of wisdom which defend your life against the Vrykol, we cannot give you. You would have to spend a lifetime learning their use first, as we did."

"Well . . ." Owen remembered Myrdin Velis. "As to that, we may be fortunate, if you aid us even as much as you can."

"But you will never return home," Hurgin repeated. "Not this way, nor by sea. There are Watchers in the sea, too . . . and not like we. Those are a people who live in the sea itself, and they hate the Vrykol more than we, if possible. And fear them less, for the sea-folk cannot be harmed by Vrykòl. They are not of human blood. And, like us, they are pledged to stand guard, until the end."

"What end?" Zelza asked, suddenly. "What end? Why do you wait here, in your stone cells, so long . . . so very long?" She stared at Hurgin. "I know how old you are, Master Hurgin. I have skill in such things."

He smiled at her. "And your people, too . . . the oldest and the youngest at once, of all human folk . . . they have come here. And not one has ever gone on, lady. Thank your Ancient Mother for that. Your folk had so much wisdom as that. But my age? True, I'm very old. I told you, we knew how to hold off death in our way. But . . . " He leaned back in his chair, closing his eyes. "Most of us, my brothers and I . . . we would be very glad to rest. When the last Vrykol is . . . gone. When there is no longer any danger that they will find a way out into the lands of men again, to spread once more, to take power and bring death and doom, to make new races of men into their herds . . . why, then many old Brothers will lie down and sleep at last."

Hurgin opened his eyes, and they were glowing brightly at the three.

"But I go on, until then," he said, and laughed. "Odd. We, who do not value life, but are pledged to aid it, and comdemned to live on even after we would rather sleep. And they, down there, who feared death so much they

embraced death in life. The Ancient Mother of mankind has a strange sense of humor, I think."

"I have no need of such sleep, just yet," Owen said, grimly. "Look, ancient master. Have you no way of hastening the end of those . . . creatures? Could you not make war on them, you and your friends the ulla riders? They look like men of their hands, and their arrows are, as you say, silver-tipped. What of that?"

"Even if we could . . ." Hurgin shook his head. "No, we would not. Many times the chiefs among these hill folk ask us to aid them in that . . . sometimes they do raid, against our advice. But they could not win, even if it were right in our eyes to do that. No, we do not take life if we are not forced to it."

"Well, then, give us what aid you can," Owen said. "We promise there will be fewer of those creatures when we meet them, eh, Khitai?"

Khitai looked at him, strangely.

"Do not forget, Owen," Khitai said, "we serve another master." His eyes moved down to Owen's pack, which lay against Owen's chair; in the bulging sack, a square corner pressed out against the canvas.

Owen followed the glance. "D'ye know, I wonder . . . tell me, Master Hurgin, do the names Ain, or Rhynel, or Myrdin Velis . . . are any of such names known to you?"

Hurgin stared at him, silently, for an unbearably long time.

"Well . . ." Owen spread out his hands, smiling. "We heard names, in the tale which was told in the eastern lands about this place . . ."

"Guest-right is speech-right." Hurgin said. "But be warned. The name of a thing often calls it up from where it sleeps. In this fortress of Eman-Amma, itself built long ages ago by one of those you named. Do not use the

names of such. One of them was the most beautiful and damnable of women, the curse of her house and her people. The second was a prince, who was her lover, and damned with her. And the third . . . most damned of all, for he was once most blessed. He was a . . . Brother of our Brotherhood, a mighty warlock above all others, who sought beyond all bounds for wisdom. Who wished to become more than a god. His name, more than any other, must not be named."

"Ah, I see." Owen nodded. "Forgive our curiosity . . . we know nothing about such people . . . and we asked, rudely . . . but now about our journey. Truly, Master Hurgin, we have no choice."

"I see that." Hurgin glanced up as an ancient man clad in the same blue robe came in, and stood silently. "There is food prepared; he of the Brotherhood will take you to it. Eat well; your mounts will be brought to the gate later, and all else you will need. On each saddle there will be a bundle, containing such charms and other things as we have learned will sometimes fend away the night walkers. But not every one of them . . . only some of them." He rose. "If you should, by Her Mercy, actually succeed where none else ever has . . . in returning alive . . . do not return by this route. Our riders slay without waiting to ask, and we cannot tell them to act otherwise. Speak to the sea-folk, and it may be you can persuade them to let you pass alive. More than that I cannot say."

"Thanks, good Master Hurgin." Owen extended his hand. "And you may be wrong. We may live. After all, death seeks the good man first, and we're all three of us somewhat wicked, myself enough for six. And I assure you, I do not want to become a Vrykol. Long life in such conditions seems less attractive than . . . well, it has no attractions for me, I may assure you. I shall try not to be drawn in this."

Hurgin studied him, as he grasped Owen's hand. His own, for such an ancient, was surprisingly strong.

"I see something in you, man," Hurgin said. "Something beyond what you seem outwardly, which is a red-bearded wandering thief. That, your hand tells me." Hurgin glanced at Zelza, and smiled. "Your folk taught us that art, but we have improved it. We read more now than lines. For instance, lady, I see that you shall gain what you most desire, and I see that the small hedge wizard here will also gain his desire. But when, and in what way, I know not. Still, that may mean that you will live, if your desire can be gained in life."

XIV

Each of the three small, woolly ullas stepped delicately downward along the path, nose to the tail of the one ahead, expressive eyes rolled upward hopeful of a chance bite at a rider's leg. Owen, in the lead, caught his mount a quick kick under its bearded chin, and the beast returned to its task of negotiating the trail.

The sun was setting now. Ahead, the trail was widening again, until it had become nearly a full-sized road, and the angle of descent was growing less. To Owen's nose, there came a strange, sharp scent; and rounding a rock wall, he pulled up his beast abruptly.

The others came up beside him, and they gazed down, over the land; and far off, they saw a flash of silver many leagues distant . . . the sea.

The land spread out below them, a wide and rolling view; thick green of field and trees, and a glimmer which might be a small river. A white line of road, dusty and empty, cut at a long angle across the green. A lush, lovely land, fit for man . . . and there was no visible signs of habitation anywhere.

The sun, reddening, lay close to the silver line of the distant sea, and outlined against the bright scarlet light,

they saw a curious spine of points and roundnesses, blackly etched out. Owen stared at it, hard; then, he chuckled, and pointed.

"There! The city!"

"And the sea," Khitai said.

"But nothing else." Zelza stared too, her sharp eyes scanning. "No smokes, so . . . would there be no villages, even of slaves?"

"True," said Khitai. "I'd like to see movement somewhere." He unslung his bow, and laid it across his knee, cocking it and dropping an arrow into its notch.

"We needn't camp here," Owen said. "Even these small villains we ride ought to feed, and there's good fodder down there. And that city cannot be farther than a night's ride." He patted the pack on his saddle familiarly. "Your post is closer than a day and a night, master magician. Be content." Then he kicked his beast's ribs, urging it forward, down the trail.

It grew darker, but a narrow moon hung in the sky, and the ullas apparently possessed excellent night vision. As the riders' eyes grew more used to the dimness, they could see the plain below in the moon's light, a woven pattern, the road's whiteness showing even more plainly.

"We may ride all night," Khitai said. Though we were warned against the night . . ."

"Could those creatures take us more easily if we were moving than standing still?" Owen asked.

Zelza was silently busy with the curious objects in the bag, which Hurgin had given them. She lifted her hand, and shook it toward the other riders; and a strange perfume drifted about them.

"Some of the old master's magic?" Owen asked, smiling. She nodded.

And now the road was level and hard, and there was no sound anywhere except the soft thudding of leathery hoof-pads and the occasional grunting wheeze of an ulla.

"Khitai!" Owen called in a low voice. "Khitai . . . wait. Go slowly."

The ullas slowed to a walk. Owen peered from side to side.

"See that, against the sky—there."

There was a jagged outline of black at one side of the road, and then ahead, more. Feathery treetops moved in a slight breeze, but the dark shapes around were still.

"Walls," Owen said. "Khitai, we're in a town."

"I think you may be right," Khitai said, and pulled up. He slid from the saddle, bow ready, his sharp eyes peering into the blackness. "But it sleeps more soundly than any town I've ever seen. And there's no smell."

Zelza too dismounted, and Owen. He handed his small mount's reins to her, and Khitai followed suit. "Stand still," he whispered, and grasped his ax.

Pointing the ax ahead, he moved very slowly toward the road's edge, a shadow on the moonlit whiteness; and Khitai padded softly after. They entered the deeper dark. Each could hear the other's breathing, and catch a faint glimmer of face against the black.

"Wait," Owen breathed. His hand gripped Khitai's arm. "Feel that."

"Wall."

Slowly he groped along it.

"Door," Khitai whispered. "Push . . . quietly. There."

"No smell," Owen said again, less cautiously now. "No smell of horses or men. Khitai, there's no living man here."

"Shall I risk light?" Khitai asked.

"Yes. Here. I found something. Feels like a dry stick. For a torch . . . ah, it's no dry stick." Owen dropped it with a rattle. "Here, I've a twist of tow. Light that."

Khitai's flint scratched and sparked, and a smoky flame caught and brightened. By the dim light, the two men stared around them.

"There'll be no problem with these inhabitants," Owen

said, kicking at what he had thought was a dry stick. "Damn. Back out, Khitai, these look like unhealthy quarters."

They backed away through the door and out onto the road, where Zelza still stood waiting.

"Dead men," Owen said, taking the reins from her hand. "Dead and dusty, since time's morning; bones, most of them, hacked and flung about. Bits of wreckage, the rust of weapons . . . there's been some fine brawling here."

"Remember," Zelza said, "Hurgin said there had been war. Long, bitter war."

"He said there were living folk left, too." Owen said, scratching his beard with the ax haft thoughtfully. "Live folk bury their own, mostly. Or toss away other bones, and use such buildings as these, for one thing or another. This has the feel of a large town, and it may be all thus. I think we're like to find fewer people here even than Master Hurgin thought."

"It might be just as well," Zelza said. She lifted her chin, listening in the darkness.

"I hear a child crying," she said.

The others listened. Owen shook his head.

"Nothing." He strained to hear. "No. Your ears are sharper, lady."

"You call me lady now," she said quietly.

"Shh. Listen again."

"I heard it," she said, after awhile. "Far away. A child afraid."

"A ghost child," Owen said. "There must be many ghosts here."

"I am a woman," she said, "though you seem to have some trouble knowing it. I know a child's cry. None of my children would ever have cause for such a cry."

"We cannot fight here if we are attacked," Khitai said. "And these folk would try to take us for their foul mas-

ters. We should move on, quietly; if a few still live in this charnel house, they may not hear us till we pass."

They moved on, leading their mounts, walking softly with weapons ready.

The road led straight on, past higher walls, and among the shattered stumps of columns, across a wide stone plaza in which there was a dry fountain. On the fountain's rim bones glinted white, and they skirted it widely.

Then the dead town seemed at an end, and empty fields stretched away on all sides; the three remounted, and rode on.

"I did hear a child," Zelza said, at last.

"I don't doubt it," Owen told her. "I imagine there may be a few humans, hiding there at night. But they may not have seen us at all, or seeing us armed, been afraid."

"Now, see that," Khitai said, and pointed.

Ahead, a fire burned; a small glowing pile, half burned out, in an open space near the roadside. Its yellow glow lit the trees around it and spilled across the road. Around it, half a dozen dark heaps seemed to be sleepers; and a rude hut of thatch stood close by.

"If one of those is awake, we cannot help but be seen," Khitai said.

"We've been seen already," Owen said. "Put the best face we can on it. Ride up to them. Come."

The man who had seen them stood in the firelight at the roadside, a squat, shaggy-maned man, dressed in coarse rags. His doughy face looked up at the three riders with an odd blankness, showing at most a mild curiosity. His mouth hung open a little, and he leaned on a crude spear.

Owen drew rein before him, jumped down, and grinned at him, extending a hand.

"Hail, friend," Owen said loudly and cheerily, and grasped the fellow's limply hanging hand, shaking it.

The man's pasty countenance shifted around a little

in a slow attempt at expression. He drew back his hand, and glanced down at it, as if expecting to find it bitten. Then he managed to get his mouth a little farther open, and emitted an odd wheezing sound.

"Look you, Khitai, the lad's as good a speechmaker as he's handsome," Owen said. Khitai dismounted, and came up.

"He looks . . . diseased," Khitai said slowly, staring at the man.

One of the heaps by the fire stirred, and sat up, then another. The first stood up, and came closer. It seemed to be a woman; seemed, because there was something not quite alive about it.

"Uhh, ah, fff," the first man muttered.

"Probably a king among his people," Owen said, smiling broadly at him. "Luka, he smells like a sewer. So do the rest of them."

"But they do not act either fearful or warlike," Khitai said. His nose wrinkled. "Aye, that smell. These folk eat odd food, I think." He moved a little closer to the first one. "And this one is more than diseased; he is dying. See the sores. I know that disease."

"Vuh." The dough-faced one said limply. He waved a hand toward the fire. "Vuh, vuh."

"I think we're invited to breakfast," Owen said.

"We may be breakfast," Zelza said. She moved forward with the others; some of the slouching women stared at her, and one touched her, fearfully, muttering.

"May we take this disease you spoke of from these?" Owen asked.

"No," Khitai said. They sat down, near the fire, among the odorous group, who sat like heaps of flesh, rocking slowly and scratching themselves. "It comes from evil food. Touch cannot carry it. Though the Gods alone know what else there may be here." Khitai glanced around, his sallow face pale.

"Strange," Owen said. "These may be the last of those mighty folk of whom Hurgin talked. Come to this."

"Gwah." It was the first man, dough-face. Squatting in the dust, before Owen, he scrawled with a stick on the ground, pausing to look up vaguely.

"Odd." Owen studied the scratching. "He draws pictures quite well. See, there we are, three riders on ullas. Now, there's a box, and a skull. Khitai, damn it if he doesn't know what we carry!"

"He had no chance to see," Khitai grunted. "Look, he draws again. The skull, on a pillar. Then, many small figures, people. And a huge figure, a foot crushing . . . I wonder . . ."

The man grunted again, in an anxious tone; squatting back on his heels, he looked at them, hopefully.

Zelza, who had been sitting near one of the younger women, rose, and came to where they were. She studied the drawings in the dirt, and nodded.

"That woman," she said, frowning. "She's afraid about something. It's something to do with us; all of these people seem to fear us, very badly."

"In that case, they'd only have to run away from us, or try to spear us," Owen said logically. "Why are they afraid of us, in particular? Do they believe we're hill raiders, because of our mounts?"

"Look again at his drawings." Zelza said. "We have come, bearing the skull. We place the skull in its proper place, as your agreement with the wizard calls for. Then, a monster treads on many people."

Dough-face had been listening, cocking his head as if he understood. At Zelza's last word, he began to draw again, his hands shaking nervously. This time the dust drawing was very large. It was a huge skull, with a great nail driven clear through it. He barely gave them a chance to see it, when he hastily erased it with a sweep of his hand. Then he drew figures, people kneeling before a

standing man in a kinglike posture, others bringing what seemed to be gifts. And the kinglike figure carried a crescent-shaped ax.

"He wants you to destroy our friend in the box," Zelza said, in a hushed tone. "If you do, his folk will kneel before you."

"It seems that these poor creatures know of . . . that one," Khitai said, glancing at the pack. "Somehow, they knew he was coming, and they fear him. Why, more than the other devils who seem to rule them, I do not know . . . nor how they learned of his coming."

"This land is not as empty as we thought," Zelza said. "I hear voices, whispering." She stared out into the darkness around, standing straight, the firelight flickering on her face.

"I think Khitai is right," she said, after a moment. "The man here wishes you to slay what is left of that wizard. I think he wishes you to drive a great nail into that thing. But if you complete the task that the wizard set you, if you put his skull in its place, he will live again in some way and become a great tyrant. That's what the drawing means."

"I gave my word," Owen said stubbornly. "Not to mention the certainty of my fate—and yours—even if I succeeded in such a plan. No. He goes home, as I promised."

Khitai looked at Zelza.

"Not only our given word, lady," he said, "although that would be enough for him. But the warlock promised we would be free of that pursuit . . . and that Owen would dream no more evil dreams. And now, one more reason: I think we have been free of attack by those demon sleepers because we carry with us the master of them all."

Owen looked up. "Damnation! That's a thought! Why, we bring back their king, I think! Myrdin Velis may be

very like these death-in-life Vrykol . . . he may be once one of them!"

The dough-faced man leaped up, backing away; his eyes were wide with terror, and he put his dirty hands over his face.

"M-myrdin . . ." he said, and moaned.

"I thought he knew," Owen said. "Then, that must mean word's gone out, from the rulers of this black land. We're to go through, freely, and find the place to put our burden."

"And then . . ." Khitai said darkly.

"Then, we'll win free, somehow." Owen stood up and stretched. "Look, is that dawn light through those trees? Shall we see if there's grass about for those small devils we ride?"

XV

The crumbling hut, the fire, dying now, and the circle of huddled, frightened slave folk became illuminated more and more brightly as the sun came up. Zelza and Khitai prepared a meal from the provisions Hurgin had given them, while Owen led the ullas into what the dawn showed him was a fine pasture, close to the tree-circle camp. He staked them down carefully, and let them crop while he returned for food. Walking back, he stared about him with increasing wonder at what the sun's new light showed.

The road ran straight, toward the still-distant clusters of towers on the far horizon. On either side were empty stretches of high grass and clumps of trees; but everywhere, among the trees, in the grassy plain . . . the broken things.

Walls, jagged and smashed, looking like the gray stumps of teeth, covered with webs of vines and leaves; and more curious than that, great red-rusted bars and slabs, twisted vines of metal covered with thick corrosion until the stuff seemed almost a natural form. Under trees, half a dozen more of the ruinous huts, which looked as if they had been flung together hastily out of anything that was

available, branches, logs, and twists of leaves and vines.

And among the ruins moved ruined people. There seemed to be at least fifty in sight now, all shuffling toward the travelers, staring with dull-eyed fascination at the three. None seemed to dare to come too close; all were dressed in ragged gray, and all looked as pale and sickly as the first ones.

"The old man in the hills did very well for us, I'd say." Owen munched the rations from the saddlebags, standing, one eye on the figures on the road behind.

"They seem to mean no harm," Khitai commented.

"Good enough." Owen wiped his mouth. "They'd be easy enough to kill, but there's a great many of them. And the reek of them might be enough to weaken my ax arm. Come, we'll get our mounts and saddle up. Our task will be done soon enough, and sooner if we hurry."

As they rode off at last, down the road, the dough-faced man shuffled behind, very slowly, staring after them and muttering sadly in his own tongue. The rest did not follow at all, but simply stood, watching the party out of sight.

"I think mighty battles were fought here," Khitai said, staring from side to side in awe. "Look there. A thing . . . Sky-bear only knows what it is. Like an iron ship on wheels."

"Whatever it was, it looks as if a giant had stepped on it." Owen commented. "Metal, metal . . . why, a smith could make his fortune in these fields."

Zelza shuddered.

"I have never smelled so much old death," she said, in a low voice "Owen . . . red-beard . . . let me ride a little nearer. I swear to you . . . for the first time in my life, I feel I need a living man close by." She laughed, unsteadily.

For hours now the roadside had been cleaner. The ruins were very few, and much less visible; but the folk

were still to be seen. Working listlessly in tiny, half-dead looking fields, sometimes peering out of the same ruinous huts, or standing by the roadside gaping, the slave folk were everywhere.

But the gates of the city itself were looming up, just ahead now.

"Luka's teeth!" Owen exclaimed, as the sight came into view. The others stared in silent wonder.

The walls shone, a polished stone that glowed in the sun, white, twenty times the height of a man. Along the walls ran a long series of vast images, set into the stone in glittering mosaics: figures of bearded, robed men, strange lizard-like animals, and twisted lettering that ran unendingly atop all. The mighty gate itself was a tremendous circular arch, on either side of which two giant black stone images stood, worn, hideous figures, gods of demons with scowling faces and clustered arms. In the gateway, the two hugh leaves of the door stood wide opened; shining metal, studded and covered with more strange sculpture.

And as they came into the shadow of the arch itself, they could see the city, spread beyond, a wide avenue, and at a distant end, a rising pyramid of glowing stone building.

And the city was *not* dead.

"We've a welcome." Khitai said, fingering his amulet.

"So I see." Owen drew his mount a little ahead, and gripped his ax. "Well . . . we may be about to die, but then again, maybe not."

In the wide avenue, on either side of the inner arch, stood a long double row of warriors, armored and armed, silently waiting.

They were tall men, cloaked in scarlet, each bearing a long spear. Each carried a round shield, gorgeously decorated; their helmets were crested in white plumes, and their body armor covered them thoroughly. There seemed

to be several hundred, stiffly standing in line on either side; not a horse or a mounted man was in sight anywhere, however. That struck Owen as odd, considering that the place looked as though the avenue had been meant for horse traffic, wide and open.

And they were so damnably silent.

Owen waved the others to a halt, no more than a few yards from the nearest man. He slid out of his saddle, and dropped his ax blade down.

For a long moment, he stood, waiting. Then, at last, he spoke out, in a near shout.

"Greetings! I am Owen of Marrdale, come here on an errand! Can any here speak my tongue?"

None moved, and none spoke.

"Why, I think they're all . . . stuffed?" Owen called back to Khitai and Zelza. He walked slowly forward, leading his mount; with a slow hand, he reached out and touched the nearest warrior.

"An image!"

"Not quite," said a voice from far up the line.

One of the shining guards stepped from behind the line and walked toward Owen.

"Greetings, Owen of Marrdale," the warrior said. "I am . . . I was . . . Jalcan of the Islands.'

Owen stared at the man, a tall, pale man with a bony face and deep-set eyes; then, he stared at the warrior he had touched first, and back again to the living one.

"Well, then, greeting to you, Jalcan," he said at last. "And what are these . . . dolls to scare enemies off?"

"Not quite," Jalcan said. "I am not like them, you see. But . . . some day I will be, I suppose." He grinned, wryly. "In the meantime, I command some of them. I am a captain of the guardsmen of this city, and I am commanded to welcome you, and he whom you bear . . ." He bowed his head. "And thus . . . if you will follow, there, we go to the High Place. And after-

ward . . . you will do that which you came here to do."

The others rode up, and waited. Jalcan glanced at them, and turned toward the line of silent figures.

He barked a sudden phrase in a strange language; and at that word, a dozen armored men stepped forward; pivoted, all at once as if they had been strung together, and so marched slowly forward, as a guard for the three.

"But those . . ." Owen, walking forward next to Jalcan, stared at the warriors who paced on either side. "But they are not alive!"

"They were, once," Jalcan said unconcernedly. "And when a man dies, need he rest?"

"I don't think the point needs study, just now," Owen said. "But you . . . you seem alive enough."

"There are many in this city who are as alive as I," Jalcan said indifferently. "I came here, twenty years ago, seeking gold. Because of an ancient scroll I found, I came a long, long way, to . . . this. Seeking gold." He chuckled not pleasantly, and touched his gleaming armor. "I found gold, you see."

Owen glanced up, at the buildings on either side, and a chill touched him. He knew those figured walls, those columns. The second dream . . . the nighted city, where death walked. It was here, though sun filled these streets.

And there were no gaping crowds, no windows full of starers as there would be in any city, at the sight of three outlandish strangers, led by guards toward an unknown fate. The windows were empty and silent, the side streets merely deserted vistas.

Not all empty, Owen saw suddenly. A window, there, had a pale face staring down. And there, another. There were living people here, then. But only a handful, it seemed.

"Tell me, Jalcan . . ." Owen said urgently. The great structure at the end of the avenue was nearer. "Tell me

of your city, here. What of these . . . Vrykol . . . your rulers?"

"Oh, yes." Jalcan glanced sideward at Owen. "Our rulers? Why, they are great . . . and many, many of them. I myself . . . I may, if I am very fortunate, become so, one day." His mouth twisted strangely. "We who serve well have that privilege, if we are chosen."

"Chosen?" Owen asked. "How?"

"Oh . . . luck, or for some great service. Or a whim," Jalcan answered dully.

"You do not seem anxious for the honored place."

"Do you know anything of the matter?" Jalcan asked Owen, sharply. "You used the name, Vrykol. Surely you know what they are."

Owen considered. "Well, only that they are magicians, who rule here, and seem to live forever. That they must feed on lives to live, however. What else?"

"Is that not enough to know?" Jalcan asked. "These . . ." he waved at the troopers around. "They are a kind of machine, made by Vrykol wisdom from dead bodies. They follow orders, but are dead as dolls. Deader, in fact, for preserved as they are, they soon fall into bones and must be flung aside. In those mighty buildings, barely a few hundreds of the people of this great city still live, with their slaves . . . and with such dolls as these. And a few others, like myself, kept alive because we serve. Unless whim . . . or hunger . . ." he shuddered, and fell silent.

"There do not seem to be enough lives available to keep too many of these magical lords of yours well fed," Owen said thoughtfully.

"There are not," Jalcan answered. "They must take even lives they need, like mine, sometimes, when their hunger grows great. As it has, of late." He shuddered again. "They are dying. Again, and again, the Black Bell

sounds, naming one more of them sunk into . . . what they must call their kind of death."

"What, death for an immortal?"

"Not death as we know it," Jalcan said. "Worse."

"But from hunger, because they cannot find a life to eat?" Owen wondered aloud. "How? There are still lives here, and out there in the country."

"The Vrykol are great lords, all of them," Jalcan said. "Each has his herd, by law and custom among them. None may take a life marked for another, only from among his own . . . human cattle. Oh, they do, though. And then they struggle, among themselves, using magic that it is not safe to even think of. And often, one, being greedy slays too many of his herds, or his people will not breed fast enough . . . and he grows hungrier, and madness comes . . ."

"This was the paradise of your dream," Khitai said, at Owen's back. He had been listening.

"Be silent, friend," Owen said, harshly. "These folk . . . one could pity."

"No pity, Owen of Marrdale," Jalcan said grimly. "They will be great and strong again, now. You bring them that."

"I?"

"Once, in their ancient time, the greatest of their sorcerers foresaw all this. He was more than a sorcerer . . . he was their king. He was already powerful beyond all of them . . . but he went out, away from this city, to seek the greatest power, in a place far away from here. He was so great a sorcerer that he, alone of all of the Vrykol, could move in sunlight and live; he could unite both his body of flesh and his shadow-double, as he would."

"And what was his name?" Owen asked.

"You know the name," Jalcan said. "You serve him."

'Myrdin Velis," Owen murmured. And in the pack

on his saddle bow, something rustled, like a snake concealed. And faintly, there came a sound, oddly like a dry chuckle.

"I dare not use that name," Jalcan said. "But he was that man . . . or more than man. Now, he shall rule again, once everything has been completed. Then he will call down magic greater than anything seen before. These few dead things . . .' Jalcan gestured contemptuoulsy, at the marching dead men. "Nothing so small as this. Dead men, a host of them, will rise to serve him. But more . . . the great, ancient machines of war, the ones that once rolled out of this city to grind down all enemies . . . by his magic and wisdom he can restore them. They will come out again, machines that can slay with no man to guide them, machines that breath fire on their enemies . . . more, there will be other servants of his name, creatures such as no Vrykol lord now dares command, from the pits under the earth!"

His eyes glowed insanely as he spoke, and Owen stared at him, feeling cold.

"Why?" Owen asked. "This mighty lord . . . what does he need all this powerful armament *for*?"

"Why?" Jalcan's eyes glittered. "Why, because only a whole world of men can feed the hunger of the sleeping lords. Because, beyond the hills, are herds of two-legged cattle, on which they can feed forever!"

And ahead of them, rising in long tiers, was a wide flight of stone steps, going up to a columned entry in a building like a mountain. And on the steps, silently waiting, stood more men, in dark robes, every pale, strange face turned toward Owen. Waiting.

Jalcan stopped at the foot of the stair, and turned toward the three.

"You alone may enter, Owen of Marrdale. Your two companions must remain here, as I must. The law bars entry to this temple to all ordinary folk. And only you

may carry . . . that which you have in your pack. Take it out, bear it up there." Jalcan paused, his mouth set. "Or take that fine ax you bear, and end that ancient horror's false existence now, if you have the courage! If I dared, or if I could, I would do that now. What you are about to do will condemn all humanity to endless death and slavery."

Owen stared at the man, who stood, white-faced, his head high and a hand on his sword hilt, as if he expected . . . something to strike.

And suddenly, it struck. Jalcan's eyed widened, and he swayed, and slowly, his knees buckled. He fell, with a clash of armor, dead at their feet.

"I see it does not do to have such ideas as his in this place," Khitai observed, staring down at the heap.

There was a ripple of woman's laughter from the empty air.

"Good Jalcan will look as well in the ranks he once commanded," came a voice, silvery and sweet. "Rise, Jalcan, and go to those whose duty it is to preserve that talkative head."

Slowly, the corpse moved, and sat up; got to its feet, blank-eyed, and walked, slowly and stiffly, away. It moved with a deliberate pace, toward a distant building, and vanished within.

"I feared my Jalcan harbored some such ideas," the woman's voice came again. "I have drunk his life, and now his body will stand guard for me a while longer, till it fall into dust. You, ax-bearing red-beard, I may not drink, although to see that hot life you have makes me thirst greatly." The trill of laughter came again, and Owen felt what seemed to be cold fingertips, touching his cheek.

He stared at the empty air, and set his jaw.

"I know that voice," he said. "Tell me, invisible, are you sometimes called Rhynel?"

"Why, this one knows my name!' the voice came. "Clever one, how did you know? I have never seen you before."

"I know," Owen said shortly.

"Well . . . we shall meet soon. Goodbye, and thank you for Jalcan . . ." The voice seemed to fade away.

"I thought those things could not slay in daylight," Zelza said thoughtfully.

"Exceptions to every rule, I'd guess." Owen said. "Besides, we're very close to their kingdom now."

"Go, then, and do what you must," Zelza said, her face dark. "Even if that poor fool was right, and you damn all human folk thus."

"I gave my word," Owen said stubbornly. "And besides . . . he may be great magician enough, but how can he alone do so much? Why, there have been tyrants aplenty in old times, and mankind outlived them. A man's free if he bears his weapon, and slave when he lays it down while he lives. I find it hard to think that so terrible a consequence could happen . . . and if it did, well, we can only fight."

Khitai shrugged. "As you say . . . we have no choice. Go, my friend, and return alive, at least."

Slowly, Owen unstrapped the pack from the ulla saddle, and took out the black, square box, holding it in both hands. It seemed strangely heavier than ever before, and hot to his touch; it seemed to hum now, with a strange life. He looked down at it, and lightly flicked the lid with a fingertip.

"Remember your promise, warlock," he said. "Come, we're off."

And Owen went up the long stairway toward the temple, bearing the skull toward its home.

XVI

Within, the giant structure was a high domed, columned space, blue-shadowed. All around the sweeping circle of the interior, in niches, stood images of men and women, larger than life, carved from dark stone; high-nosed, arrogant faces, each with a resemblance to the others, as if they were all of the same clan. And in each face there was a look of power, and of dominance; they were obviously portraits from life, seeming almost alive even in the stone.

In the exact center of the dome stood a wide raised platform of stone, and centered in the platform, a round opening, three times a man's length across, like a huge well mouth. A thin eddy of faint blue vapors drifted from the well, and struck Owen's nostrils with a curiously familiar feeling. But what it was he could not recall.

Over the mouth of the well, suspended high in the air on a thick metal chain, hung a round disk of some shining silvery substance, suspended as if it were a kind of cover. And around the mouth of the well, silent and immobile, stood a small group of black-robed men, waiting.

There seemed to be no one else in the temple; neither worshipers, if worship were the purpose of such a place,

nor guards; only the handful before him. Owen walked the long distance, to the platform, carrying the box. He stepped up, stopped, and looked at the black-robed men.

Then one among them pushed back his hood, and stared at Owen, his deep-set black eyes mocking. It was Simon.

"Luka!" Owen stared at the magician's apprentice in wonder. Slowly, he lowered the box to the platform, and straightened up, flexing his hands.

"Your late master's a heavy load," Own said, grinning. "Well, now, how flew you here, my lizard-faced friend, and why in the name of seven demons didn't you give us the trick of it so we'd have been spared the walking?"

Simon's mouth stretched into a smile.

"Bold. Very bold," he said appreciatively. "Ah, but Myrdin Velis chose well. A bold man, and a foolish one . . . and a man of his word. Owen of Marrdale, there is little that can surprise me, but your journey does it. To have come so far . . . to doom all your kind, and for so small a reason."

"I'm here," Owen said.

"And so you are," Simon said. "So you are. Well, my master would never have trusted me to carry out his task, since he knew me full well by the time of his . . . change. Nor could he destroy me, then or now; I am as strong as he in most ways—though not in all, I fear. Only one certain man could do this thing, Owen: you. Nor was there any magic strong enough to carry what you have carried; only a man's hands could do it. But I had hoped you would have met your death along the way . . . or that you might have given your life for your own kind, and struck the skull to pieces."

"I thought you served Myrdin Velis, Simon," Owen said. "What, do you break the law of 'prenticeship?"

"Among magicians, there's no honor save in the letter of the oath given," Simon said. "My bargain with him

has been fulfilled, and is ended. Now . . . I came here to seek what he possessed. But for a different reason. I desired to go on, alive as I now am, not as a shadow. Nor did I wish for power over many men's lives. I do not feed as he does, and I do not have a need for human cattle. I came here, knowing that in a short while those who dwell below would be no longer able to defend their realm. I am patient. I would have awaited their end, and then, taken what I wished." He sighed, and shook his head.

"I've brought you disappointment, then," Owen said. "My sorrow for staying alive, friend. Now, I believe that smoky hole gives entry to the place I seek. Are you, or these gloomy friends of yours, barring my way?"

"These are priests who fear me as much as they fear the others," Simon said. "They will not bar you, and I cannot. While you bear that, I cannot injure you. But hear: slay the skull. I will tell you how. There's a silver inlay on your ax head, that will do it well enough. If you but strike, once—"

"Oh, come now, lizard-face, you're the third one's made that request today, I think." Owen chuckled, and shook his head. "Nemianite, I keep my given word.'

"He promised to free you from the evil dream you had," Simon said, in an urgency increasing as he spoke. "And to lift the curse of the pursuing hounds. I can do both. Both, and wealth too . . ."

"Oh, well, as to wealth, I've the price of a grand big piece of land bagged away in a jeweler's cellar in Mazain." Owen said easily. "And I don't doubt you could favor me with the lifting of curses and the like. But I gave my word, and there's no price on that at all."

Simon stared at him, silently, for a while. Then, he spread his hands.

"Well enough. But I will tell you one thing for which you may feel gratitude to me, and that may harm Myrdin Velis. He will not cheat you, but he will try to make you

Vrykol, and then you will always be his slave. But, as you are now, you hold his fee-service. It is a law of wizards that one who has done service of a certain kind may never be slain by us. He is bound by that law; he may not ever slay you, nor prison you, nor any of his servants may do so."

"That's a good thing to know, look you," Owen said. "I've noticed that he had a curious taste in food, while we took our sea voyage together, and I'm glad I'm forbidden to him. And now, if you don't mind . . ."

He picked up the box, and went to the lip of the well. Looking down, he saw a winding stair, and a horribly familiar bright-misted light; a pearly depth beyond his sight.

"For now, then, fare you well, good Simon," Owen said, and went over the lip and down.

Khitai and Zelza still stood and waited among the silent, dead guards in the great open space before the temple. Around them, the gleaming towers and domes of the empty city thrust up at the sky; down long empty avenues, a vagrant wind eddied. A long way down one such avenue, Zelza noticed a glitter of silver light, which she pointed out to Khitai.

"The place has a harbor, too," he said. "Ah, but this must have once been a great city!" He looked thoughtful. "I wonder if there are still ancient works of wisdom . . . a library, perhaps, of wise ones . . . no, impossible. None such would still live."

"Not among the people I glimpsed in those windows along the way," Zelza said. "And this is no time to think of such things. Listen, yellow man. That red-beard fool is probably already dead. If he's not, I . . ."

Khitai was astonished to see her eyes were bright with tears.

"I did not know you could feel so . . . strongly, lady," he said. "But I think Owen lives. He will return."

"There are living people coming," Zelza said.

The guards remained standing, blankly staring; they made no move at all, as the approaching figures neared. Zelza, impatiently, thrust past them; her ulla followed; and shouldered one, who fell as wooden as a statue, on his face. Khitai followed her warily.

There were half a dozen of them; four men and two women, dressed in flowing robes of a brightly embroidered cloth, wearing heavy jewelry, outwardly seeming to be wealthy nobles. But they had the same tense, white faces and wary eyes as all the folk that Zelza had seen so far. They walked like slaves, despite their garments. The first man reached Zelza and Khitai, and spoke in a harsh whisper.

"I know your tongue. Many of us, from eastern lands . . . come quickly. Leave those beasts . . . they'd be eaten before night falls, in any case. Come . . . come now."

"We'll take the ullas," Zelza said. Neither she nor Khitai could abandon a mount; both their nomad heritages forbade the notion. Khitai grasped both bridles of the two he led, and Zelza grasped her own.

"The lady speaks," Khitai said. "I dislike walking, and we will need these woolly devils awhile yet."

"We need to make haste," the man said. "I am Arin, and I live in this city; I know what begins when night falls. There are those who wish to speak with you, there in the city." His voice shook. "The sun is too low. Hurry."

"Owen will return here . . ." Zelza said doubtfully.

"If you mean the red-beard with the ax, he will never return," Arin said. "But if he did, he'd only need to call out to find you. There are so few folk here, he would be heard . . . come, please!"

"I think we should do this," Khitai said. "We can return here. Very well, Arin. Lead."

They were hurried down a side street and into a courtyard with a barred gate, which Arin closed behind them.

"Tie your beasts here," he said, glancing behind him. "I saw no one watching; but the slave folk are always hungry for meat, and if they see the creatures, they'll steal them. Not that it matters, you'll not ride out from this place."

He went ahead of them into the building, and they followed.

Inside, there were long dusty halls, open doorways into great rooms with magnificent furnishings and hangings, all empty and filmed with grime. Twice they passed rooms in which two or three people moved about, evidently living there. Then, finally, they came to an arched room in which a dozen more of the robed city folk waited.

"These are the travelers who came with him," Arin said, more loudly now, as if he feared less. "They waited in the squre before the temple."

"Did your companion truly have the living skull with him?" a haggard man asked, eargerly. "It was a false skull, was it not?"

"No," Zelza said. "It was the true skull, if I understand you."

There was a murmur among the group, some evidently having to have her words translated into their own tongue.

Arin spoke to her. "All of us here, the highest remaining nobles of this place . . . we live only because our . . . our own ancestors are among the night folk. Even that will not save us much longer. We bore with the horror for generations. We saw no way to change . . . and in truth, it could not have been as bad once, when there were plenty of slaves. But now . . ."

"But now the worst has happened," the haggard man said. "You have brought the demon king back, to rule

again. Now we shall never be free of the night folk, the city will never rise again . . . except as he wills it, as a hell."

Khitai and Zelza stood under the accusing stares; and Khitai stared back, cold-eyed.

"You are cowards," he said, in a clear voice, smiling thinly. He lifted his bow, slightly, but at the ready position.

"Cowards," he repeated. "Why did you never rise and destroy your night devils?"

"There was no way," Arin said. "We could not enter their world below. It lies below this city, vast caves under the whole city. Even there, we could never have done more than slay one or two of their true bodies where they lie. And us . . . they can slay as they chose, invisible. There may be one here, now. We never know, though we use charms . . ."

"We saw your slave folk, as we came," Khitai said. "You were great ones here, and you are no better than they." He spat expressively on the tiled floor. There was an angry murmur from the group, but none moved.

"What help could we have been?" Zelza asked. Arin shook his head.

"We thought you might have known something we could do," he said. "You were with the skull. You might have learned some way . . . but I can see you do not."

"We're all lost," the haggard man said, and turned away.

"As you said, yellow man," came a voice from the doorway. "Cowards and slaves."

In the door stood a tall, black-robed figure, bony-faced, with deep eyes glittering sardonically; and Khitai, his calm shaken, uttered an oath in his own tongue.

"You!"

"Simon," the other said. "Now, fellow wizard, let us lay plots together, against the majesty of the demon king." And Simon laughed, a sound like breaking ice.

Suddenly, from far below, there came a sound like nothing heard by human ears; a bell-like sound, but a bell that no man could have imagined, a clang that seemed to shake the walls. And under their feet, the floor itself seemed to rise and sink again, like a sea wave; a strange heave seemed to thrust the city itself up, for a moment. Somewhere, there was the sound of falling stones, and voices cried out.

"Myrdin Velis sits now upon the throne so long left empty," Simon said, in a singing voice. "Now are the sons of men doomed to dread; now shall night come to earth."

He smiled upon the terrified group, huddling against a wall, and toward Khitai and Zelza, standing.

"Your friend Owen will return now, soon," he said. "This fate was not to be changed. But as I said . . . small wizard, shall we plot together?"

XVII

The winding stair seemed to hand unsupported in the pearly mists as Owen made his way downward. The distance grew and grew; the weight in his hands was heavier.

He passed odd things lying on the stairs; rusted weapons, a scatter of bones; and other less namable objects. Others had come here, less luckily than he, he thought. And then, the voice came . . . out of the black box.

"Not much farther, Owen of Marrdale," it said in the silver voice of Myrdin Velis. And it laughed.

"I'm glad to hear it," Owen said, and smiled without joy. The mist was thicker now, and the strange, sharp scent was dizzying. The air seemed to hurt his lungs, and a nausea grew within him. Fear, he thought, and thrust it down as far as he could.

Then he reached the bottom, and stood, trying to see into the bright, shadowless and featureless mist around.

"So you've come at last."

She stood against the mist, her long light hair blowing loose in an unfelt wind; her eyes were lit as if by some internal fire. But she seemed as real as any woman . . . and Owen knew she could not be.

"Rhynel," he said.

"I wish I knew where you learned my name," she said. "Ah, but that's a secret, isn't it?" Her lambent eyes stared at the black box. "And here comes our dread lord, in a carriage much smaller than usual . . . O Myrdin Velis, can you hear me?"

"I can hear," came the voice from the box. "Let my servant pass, Rhynel."

"But I would like him for *my* servant." Rhynel, smiling, still barred the way. "Give him to me, mighty Myrdin Velis."

"You might have asked me," Owen said.

"Very bold, red-beard," she fluted, and her eyes found his. "Would you live forever, red-beard? Would you live in joy and light, among us in the garden, for all time? I can show you the way . . . and not as a servant."

"If I remember, lady Rhynel, you already have a man of your own," Owen said, grinning at her. "I have heard the name, Ain."

"Oh, poor Ain . . . poor Ain." The laughter was shining cruel. "He died, in the way we sometimes die . . . or rather, he has become nothing, though still alive. He gave me much, poor Ain, more than he could afford. I will show you his fate, red-beard, and you may laugh at him. But come . . . come with us, be one of us . . . cast that dried bone down and break it, and I shall lead you to joy."

"Master Myrdin, you seem to have few friends anywhere," Owen said, looking down at the box. "Again I've been urged to throw you aside."

"The pretty one is greedy, as she has always been," came the voice from the box, as untroubled as ever. "Of these who dwell here, many would speak as she has. They are like children, satisfied with their play and with their toys, while larger matters wait. But she will be glad of my coming soon."

Rhynel began to fade back into the mist as the voice spoke, and now it was hard to see anything of her except her glowing eyes. Her voice came, mocking, growing distant.

"I shall see you again, Owen. Go now, and wait for me . . ."

He shrugged, and picked up the box. He still felt oddly ill and dizzy; and it seemed to be impossible to tell which way to go. The mist hid everything. But conversation with the black box now seemed less strange, as usual as speech with another human being might have been; he grinned at the thought.

"Master Myrdin, you'll have to guide me, if you can," he said. "I see nothing here. Where is the river, the trees, the white houses of my dream? Were they unreal?"

"They exist," Myrdin's voice said. "You are not Vrykol. You cannot see well in this place. But I can. Walk forward, Owen. Have no fear."

He moved forward at Myrdin's order, walking on a queer, pebbled path that was visible only for a few feet in either direction. In the mist, shadows seemed to float by, and eyes glowed at him; there were distant, hollow whisperings.

"Here is the place we called the garden," Myrdin's voice came, calm as one who might point out features in a passing landscape. "It lies under the city above, a great cavern. As my people learned the art of becoming Vrykol, as these who dwell here now are, one by one they descended to this place. They emerge from it, in their shadow bodies, to feed, and to rule the world above, and return to this place to live in the fire of joy."

Out of the mist, a strangely twisted shape emerged, a tree; and another, shining trunks made of something like black glass. And just beyond, the white facade of what Owen recognized as one of the houses of his dream.

"Here was the house of one great lord of these, who

made a grievous error," the voice said. "For none of us is perfectly wise, none perfectly invulnerable. Not even I am armored without flaw, little man. Though you shall never find my flaw, know that it exists. Are you growing very wise, apprentice?"

Owen stared at the open hall of the white house before him, through the swirling mist. He nodded, thoughtfully.

"Thank you for the teaching Myrdin," he said.

Of course, he thought. The wizard tempted him, on purpose. Myrdin wanted him to try some act against his life, and failing, the wizard's own oath to him would be broken, and he would belong to Myrdin, a slave. I may be no wizard, he thought, but neither am I quite a fool.

He moved a little closer to the house before him, and saw the central hall, cool light flooding it. On the floor, there was something dark, like a huge stain . . . but a stain that moved. And now Owen heard a faint sound, a high, thin wail, that seemed to go on and on, up and down in pitch, endlessly.

With horror, he realized that the thing on the floor was wailing, as it writhed, twisting, struggling, and nailed in some way to that spot, it struggled on and on . . . and wailed.

"He suffers, of course," Myrdin said, in a tone of mild interest. "For eternity, or as near it as possible . . . but I told you, even we may make mistakes. He has made his. Come, Owen . . . on."

The path wound on, and the whispering voices grew louder; now there seemed to be a great crowd, all about them in the mist. And then, another white wall emerged, and an open door, and Owen knew that they had reached their goal at last. The voices suddenly fell silent.

He walked in, and the green pillar stood there, waiting, under a beam of golden light. Tall shadows stood in half seen niches along the walls, and the pattern on the floor

seemed to twist under his feet, as Owen approached and set the box down on the floor.

Slowly, he opened the catch, and lifted the lid.

The skull within was a quite ordinary skull, very old, yellow stained and dry. But set into its empty eye sockets were two purple stones, and a thin band of gold lay around its temples. And its teeth were stained with dry brown flakes, which Owen stared at with remembered chill.

He took the thing in his hands, his flesh crawling, and carried it to the pillar of green stone; there, atop the pillar, there was a cup-depression, ready-shaped for it and he set it carefully in place.

The green stone of the pillar flared with sudden light. Violet flashes flickered, and an enormous bell-like sound rang through the place. In the mists outside, a shout of many voices rolled echoing, words in an unknown language.

And Myrdin stood there, beside the green pillar, substantial and real, smiling, young . . . alive in all appearance.

"The task is done," Myrdin said formally, and Owen bowed his head.

"I have returned, as once I said I would." Myrdin seemed to speak to many others as well as to Owen, though his glowing eyes rested principally on Owen. "Now, I shall call out my servitors, out of the earth where they slept awaiting me. I shall unchain my beasts, and my armies shall rise up. Those who once rebelled against me shall know me again; their descendants shall bow to me, and be my cattle. Great shall be my city and my empire, here, and on the earth under the sun . . . and at last, beyond even the earth, I shall rule."

Another echoing shout, louder, came from the mists around, and shadowy forms crowded closer. In the cor-

ners of the room, the vast shapes stirred as Owen watched. One was a giant thing of metal, like a man, but twice as tall, which shifted on its hooved feet as if awakening from sleep. There was a monstrous bird shape, too, whose leathery wings opened a little, and whose beak turned to and fro. A third thing was not of any definable shape; it looked like a shrouded statue, but it too seemed to shift and eddy.`

The warlock's eyes rested on Owen.

"Now, you are free. No hound shall pursue, and now, I free you from that dream which held you in terror, and yet drew you. I lift all blindness and compulsions from you."

A strange sensation, a flash of heat, touched Owen, and he staggered, his vision blurring. Something had indeed struck at him, he knew . . . but something else seemed to have happened.

The unsated hunger of the dream had always been with him, even after the second vision, with Zelza. Always, his nature as a man had struggled with the evil of the dream, and always the dream had won. Now, he saw why, and what power that dream had possessed. He felt a wave of revulsion so powerful that he could taste a bitterness in his mouth; against the inward fear, that every man has of death. That fear was the cunning trick by which these Vrykol had been trapped, for trapped they were. They had been driven by fear, into creating greater fear. And Owen knew now that he too had been driven thus.

Zelza's face came back to him, with a warm new knowledge of what she was; and an accusatory feeling, of how little he had returned to her of what she had given.

Owen blinked dizzily, and stared at the master magician, bracing himself on his ax. Beyond, through the wide openings in the walls, the mist seemed much less; Owen could see the faint shapes of the stone trees, and the edges of other houses.

"Go now, Owen of Marrdale." the wizard said. His eyes were flaming now, and his tone was strange. "Go . . . quickly. I may not burn you to dust . . . if I could, this shadow over my power would pass. You are my enemy . . . whom I may not touch. Go."

Owen turned, and went out, on to the pebbled paths, and instinct leading, toward where he hoped the way out would lie. The mists closed round him, and the whispers went on; but he walked on, firmly.

XVIII

At long last, after wandering in several directions, he found the foot of the winding stair. The voices were thick in the air around this spot; the eyes glowed from the mist like fireflies, and over all, came the silver voice of Rhynel, calling his name, pleadingly.

"Return, Owen . . . Owen, Owen . . ."

He felt no attraction at all now, only a cold distaste. Step by step, he climbed upward, over the bones and broken weapons, up, and up. And at last, a circle of light above, different from the mist below, and he climbed up and out.

The temple was no longer a place of shadows. Great, glaring torches were clustered about the pillars, and a thick black smoke drifted through the high dome. At his feet, on the platform, Owen nearly stumbled over the black robed body of a priest; and now he saw another, just beyond, dead. A little farther on, two more; there was no indication of the manner of their deaths, but dead they were. Nor were any living men visible; yet, from the city outside, he could hear a strange sound, like many voices wailing and shouting.

And around him, as he broke into a run, he could hear

the hissing whispers of Vrykol, excited, buzzing near him like flies, and invisibly pursuing.

Outside, the city was in darkness; night had come. But there were no stars overhead; the thick smoke was eddying even there, across the black sky; and the light of fires was reflected redly down from the black clouds. All across the wide area before the temple lay bodies, gray-clad slaves, and here and there a better dressed one of the city folk. All dead.

The only moving shapes in the space were the armed dead, the guardsmen; in squads they marched and countermarched, stiff-stepping automata, obeying some unheard command. A line of them stood, blank-eyed, barring his way, and as he came nearer, each one raised a sword, and pivoted to face him.

"Luka's teeth, I've no time for this!" Owen barked, and ran in, swinging low, the crescent ax whistling under the first sword blade. The guard fell forward, and a second whirled to face Owen, sword up, and clanging on the ax's haft. A down stroke, and the creature toppled, half its head gone, but without a drop of blood.

And Owen was through their line; and insanely, they did not follow. They stood, ignoring their fallen members, still in line, facing the temple, blank-faced and empty-eyed.

At a dead run, Owen crossed the plaza, dodging past each marching squad. None of them challenged or pursued; he now guessed the secret. The automata did nothing without an order; and now, their orders were apparently only to march, and march, endlessly.

But the city was on fire, somewhere; red light shone among the mighty buildings. And in the night, the Vrykol hunted now as they had never hunted before. They seemed to have gone mad, and all restraints that had ever been on their hunger were taken away. As Owen sought down one street, and along another, he saw a woman die,

clutching her throat, as an invisible creature drained her. Then a man, running from a building, and a group of three, who ran down a street, dropping all at once.

The living inhabitants of the city were fleeing, madly and in panic. Owen found himself on a street which ended at a wide stone quay, extending out into night black water. There was a crowd of maddened people on the stones; as he came nearer, one and then another at the crowd's edge shrieked and died, and others leaped into the water and swam. A boat was pulling away, loaded heavily, oars thrusting in flailing disorder.

Owen pushed into the mob, listening to the din in an unknown language, and hopefully staring about him in the dimness. There was no sign of Zelza or Khitai here, nor did there seem to be anyone who could speak in his own language.

He was about to turn away, when he saw the lights out on the black water, and he stopped to watch.

The lights were blue-white, very bright, and seemed as distant as the horizon. They moved swiftly, in groups of six or eight. Then, far out in the water, a white flash of foam slashed out, and another. Shadowy forms rose above the water, leaping and sinking down again, and Owen narrowed his eyes, trying to see. They had looked like men . . . but riding great fish? But now there was nothing to see but what seemed to be overfilled boats, wallowing out to an unknown fate.

He moved away, more slowly this time, into the city, moving toward where he thought the outer gate might be. Now and again running people passed him, mostly heading for the waterfront; sometimes they were not pulled down by the invisible killers but often enough they were. It was evident to Owen that he, for whatever reason, was not to be touched.

Then, down a dark street, came a familiar woolly shape, galloping in panic, riderless and with its reins dragging.

Owen, with a wordless shout, snatched at the ulla's bridle, and dragged it to a stop, where it stood panting and baring his teeth.

"So, so, friend . . ." Owen held it still. "Where . . ." He studied the beast in the red-glowing twilight. It was most damnably hard to tell one of the woolly devil's children from another, he thought; but this one . . . no, this was not one of the three they had ridden. At least, the saddle was different; an ornamented saddle, with a bundle of arrows slung on it.

Ulla-riders, here in the city? Owen scratched his beard, thoughtfully. Now what?

And around the next corner, there was the great gate, and more of the refugees . . . and ulla-riders! As he watched, a line of hooded riders galloped across the boulevard, between a straggle of refugees and something that pursued them . . . something unbelievable.

It looked like a metal caterpillar, eyeless and clanking, bigger than a man, running with a humping gait toward the refugees. From another side, a dozen or more of the dead guardsmen strode out to form a chain across the open gate, as if to block passage out.

Four of the riders wheeled, and with a speed that Owen had never believed the little beasts could attain, galloped in line across the line of guards. As they rode, each hooded man bent low. Short bows twanged, and arrows flew; guards fell, although some stood firm with arrows in them, as if they felt nothing.

The other riders lowered long lances, and charged the metal caterpillar. The first rider's lance snapped, and as he passed the thing, it raised its evil-looking head and snapped. The ulla shrieked, and fell, writhing, and the rider was hurled to the stones. The second lancer thrust at the same moment, and his lance went deep; but the snapping head rose again, with deadly effect.

"Now then," Owen said aloud. "Those lads seem to

need help the most." He spun the ax in a whirling circle as he charged, running past an amazed rider who pulled up as he shot under the man's lance. The ax slammed deep into the monster, just behind the evil head, slicing through and out, as Owen leaped back from the snapping head. In, again, and slash, and this time the mandibles clashed within inches of his arm. But the second cut hurt the beast. It reared up, screaming horribly, and bit at itself. It rolled, and arched, beating against the stones of the street, and, twitching, died.

"Ah-hai!" one of the ulla riders shouted approvingly, and swung his lance in salute, grinning at Owen. The others wheeled, and charged the line of guardsmen at the gate again, bearing them down under lance and arrow.

Then the refugees ran for the gate, climbing over the dead men piled in the way, and Owen, panting a little, followed. The riders circled behind him, and one of them rode up to where he walked.

"Ha!" the rider said, bending from his saddle with a grin. "You . . . we look for you. You . . . friends. Out there, outside city. Go quick, we follow. This bad place."

"This *very* bad place," Owen said. "Outside, eh? Trust Khitai to find a safe spot." He went on through the gate, glancing curiously at the dead men who had died a second time in this strange place.

As he went down the road, the last of the riders came out behind him, some of them carrying wounded men on their saddles and walking beside their mounts; they had quite evidently been fighting hard. Out of the city, the black smoke seemed less. Bodies lay at the roadside, and even here the Vrykol had evidently fed; but now Owen could hear no whispering voices in the air. Ahead, there was a rough barricade of logs and brushwood across the road, and ullas were picketed nearby. Behind the

barricade, fires burned; on either side, there were more fires, all along the city wall. The light danced on the great mosaic figures on the wall, making them seem to move.

There was the air of a great military camp behind the roadblocks. Hundreds of the hill men both afoot and mounted milled about, and more continued to ride up. Refugees, from the city, mingled with growing crowds of the shambling slaves from the country side, all excited, noisy, and in a mixture of terror and exaltation.

On a slight rise, in the fields, Owen found the headquarters of the hill folk at last. There were skin tents, ornamented with gaudy and incomprehensible paintwork; totem flags and shields, and a crowd of what seemed to be strutting chieftains and minor lords. And there was one tent, quite plain, near which stood old men in coarse blue robes.

Inside, under flickering oil lamps, they were assembled, waiting for him. Khitai, and Zelza, and Owen's eyes lit up to see her; and Hurgin, who stood staring silently from under dark brows, at him as he entered. And Simon alone, seated in a chair with folded hands, who smiled coldly as Owen came in.

He paused in the tent's entrance, and dropped his ax heavily to the earth. His eyes swept over the gathering again.

"Zelza," he said quietly, and smiled; a flash of understanding leaped between them.

"Khitai . . . nothing can kill you, small man," Owen said, "And the apprentice wizard. Greeting, Simon. And to you, Master Hurgin, greeting."

"If I had known what you bore, red-beard, your bones would have bleached in yonder hills," Hurgin said, his voice icy. "Know you what you have done?"

"I'm afraid I do know," Owen said, calmly. "But I had no choice."

"There is no need for cursing, good Hurgin," Simon said distantly. "He speaks truth. These things are written. None may change what is to be, in time. In the end, what he has done may yet serve your end, Watcher. At least, your watching has ended now forever."

"The earth itself may end now, forever," Hurgin said. "Your sorcery opposes the black one's sorcery, and holds his hellish powers locked within the city—now. But for how much longer? How long will it take him to unearth something far stronger to hurl against us?"

"Oh, not long, not long at all," Simon said calmly. "My mighty master can raise such powers as could sweep us all away like mice before a hurricane. In time . . . in time. But meanwhile, I have raised walls of sorcery around his walls. And now, our riders here, and the sea folk there, may draw away the poor human fodder on which his own folk must live. How long may Vrykol live without human lives to drain? A day, or two . . . and there are no living folk left within that city now. Such fools as stayed have now been sacrificed to frightened greed. Frightened godlings! That thought alone is worth all!" And Simon's laughter echoed in the tent.

"If every Vrykol who served him lies frozen into living death tomorrow," Hurgin said deliberately, "he alone can still defeat us. Nor will he be long alone. He needs neither Vrykol nor human allies. Remember, he holds keys to many worlds."

"How well I know that," Simon said, nodding as calmly as before. "Yet have I hope of defeating him. And with the use of this red-bearded one here, whom you would curse, I shall."

He rose, and stretched.

"Meanwhile, we rest, and wait. Bring up your ancient engines, Master Hurgin; tell the masters of the sea folk to lie close upon the harbor, and watch my fires, so no shadow folk may slip forth. Tomorrow, in the gar-

den, they will slay each other, and lie in eternal pain. They will beat like moths against my magic fires, and starve."

"Tomorrow?" Hurgin said sourly. "Tomorrow, he will raise a legion of things such as human eyes have not seen in this age. Tomorrow, demons will guard his walls, and monsters sally from his gates."

"I have a few keys to various hells myself," Simon said. "You and I will fight his demons. Red-beard here has a greater honor. Having served Myrdin so well, he shall now be given the task of slaying him." He smiled at Owen. "You alone he may not slay, because of the law. Sleep well, Owen of Marrdale."

XIX

The sun rose in a red glow against the ribboning black smoke that still streaked the sky of morning. All along the vast length of the city wall, the fields were filled with the camps of the invaders. Now there were horsemen, from tribes that lived a hundred days march away; wanderers who in some way had known that the day they awaited was near, and had been drawing closer for many days, hopefully. Hill dwellers of a hundred tribes were still coming in, mounted and afoot. Some were apparently under the command of blue-robed members of the Brotherhood, but others had come of their own accord.

Out of the ragged countryside, the gray-clad slaves had risen, coming to a semblance of life after so many years of living death. These, more than any, were filled with hate against the shadowy masters who had owned them for so long.

The great gate was closed now, but there was no sign of movement along the walls. Outside, riders kept patrol, but none attempted to enter the city, and no more refugees had come out.

Owen stood with Zelza at the edge of the great camp. Together they looked toward the sea, watching

the distant flashing that indicated the passage of the sea-riders.

"In some other life, no doubt I've trodden on a god's toe," Owen said, glumly. "Chasing ghost women, while a fine wench trots at my heels . . ."

"I treasure such few and fine compliments as I gain from you, red-beard," Zelza said.

"Now, I must needs go and try to slay a demon. For what reason, I cannot understand, except that his demon-ship seems somehow my doing." Owen shrugged. "Well, I've had a full share of this business. You and I, sweet lady . . . we'll take the gold I left in Mazain, buy horses and a fine cart, and set out across the cleaner lands in the east. With a bit of trading and a little stealing, we may live well, eh? Shall I be a Rom king, on those eastern roads?"

She laughed, a little shakily. "When you come out of that place, I'll hold you to those words."

"*If* I come out, I think." Owen turned to look at the city walls. "The wizard Simon told me little enough. He says that Myrdin may not slay me, nor may any Vrykol take my life, for some damned wizard's lawbane. However, there are things within the city that own no law at all save slaying, he says. Like those corpse guards, but worse; more like the queer beasts that were hunting down the city folk toward the end."

"Hurgin spoke of those things," Zelza said. "He said that in the old days, in the great wars that were fought here, the wizards of the city and the rebels both used creatures like that against each other."

"All such folk are damned," Owen grunted. "What's wrong with clean steel, sword and ax, or an arrow's flight? Why did they need to use filthy tools against each other? No wonder the gods forsook them all, and gave them over to demons to rule 'em."

"You must go soon," Zelza said. "The sea folk will

await you at the shore. They know the secret way, to let you enter the place below the city."

"I know," Owen said. "And I'm to seek out our late companion of the road, and hew down his green pillar, and, if I live so long, split his bony box. And that, says Simon, will be his end, and likely mine."

Zelza bit her lip, and was silent.

On the beach, a league below the city, the sea-riders waited. Five of them stood waist-deep in the water, while their mounts lay farther out, blowing gently as they rocked in the waves. Owen, approaching, looked these allies over thoughtfully, thinking of his task with little pleasure.

They looked very like men, but only at a distance. Their skins were a slate blue, and their high foreheads slanted back in a way no human head could ever do; and odd fleshy ruffs rose around their pointed faces. Round eyes surveyed him coldly; silently, finned hands gestured him forward. He waded into the water, while Zelza stood and watched him go.

Their mounts were dolphins, saddled and bridled; not an easy ride, as Owen soon found. The great sea beasts shot through the water in an arching spray, rising and falling in a movement that made him cling with all his strength. The sea folk who rode beside him wore wide grins, seeing his discomfort, but made no sound.

The riders circled out and back toward the city harbor. Through the spray, Owen caught a glimpse of the city, from the sea side; long empty wharves, and what might have been a great ship once, lying sunken and rotting. But nothing moved there, only more of the black smoke that eddied out of the empty streets.

Then a rider drew closer, and made gestures to Owen, putting a hand on his own splayed nose and pointing to

Owen. The meaning was clear enough. Owen took a mighty breath, and clamped his hand over his mouth and nose; his mount arched and dove down into the green depths.

Around him, he saw dim towers, arching structures of kelp hung webwork over dark deeps, and more of the bright violet sparks of light which seemed to be the sea-riders own way of illumination. His mount shot deeper, and his lungs seemed to burn.

Then, under an arched doorway, and up, into a pool, under brilliant violet light, and Owen breathed again, gasping.

The other riders surfaced beside him, and helped him to stand on a wet platform; they grinned at each other, nodding in silent mirth. Shaking water from his hair, he stared around.

Narrow passages led away, in several directions, all lit with violet lights. Other sea folk stood, waiting; and one, wearing a kind of bronze neck ornament, came toward him, grinning. The creature carried a large flat board in its hand, and a stick of some sort of crayon. It held up the board, and drew, hastily, stick figure signs in unmistakable picture writing.

Evidently the creatures could not speak at all, Owen realized, studying the message.

It was also evident that they cared very little for land dwellers. But the meaning of the message was clear enough. He was to enter a hidden passage, which would lead him to the garden under the city. He was to close all gates with great care behind him, and if he should return by that way, he must not bring any shadow folk with him.

He nodded, understanding. The one with the bronze neckpiece beckoned, and he followed through the violet-lit passages.

Owen guessed that he might be the only land dweller

in a long age to have seen these folk in their own place, and might very well be the last. But hurried along through the journey, he had time for only a flashing glimpse of work places where strange forges glowed with cold fires, groups of blue folk who stared with lidless eyes as he passed, and odd painted images here and there, of scenes no land-born eyes had ever seen.

Here, in a domed room, was a round copper door, marked with odd runes. On the walls was a circle of painted images, unlike any he had seen before. The pictures were of land dwellers, the same arrogant faces he remembered: the rulers of the city. Under the hands of the pictured rulers, queer vats and gleaming devices worked; here and there a child lay under the strange devices. First, a human child . . . then a blue-skinned, ruffed sea dweller. The meaning was clear: the creation of the sea folk.

The copper door was opened, flakes of ancient corrosion falling as it was unbarred and swung. It seemed clear that this way had not been used for long ages; but the passage beneath was lighted, with the same violet gleam.

Owen climbed down into it, and the door clanged shut behind. With no great enthusiasm, he walked along the narrow curving passage, his wet boots squishing in the damp slime which floored the way.

It curved down in a spiral, to a second domed room, where there were no images painted on the dripping walls, and a single spark of violet light hung dimly. On the wall, a huge copper wheel projected, from which a broken chain hung, and next to that, a round pipe thrust into the room, a pipe nearly wide enough to walk into. Beside that, an open door led to further deeps.

Owen paused here, and studied the huge wheel. Leaning into the pipe's mouth, he listened, hearing the sound that came softly out of it, the steady beating of the sea.

A valve, he thought. Now, if one opened that, would

not the sea rush in on the garden under the city? It might have been put there for just such a purpose. But, he thought, it seemed doubtful that Myrdin could be put down by so simple a thing. No, he could not escape his task so easily, much as he would like to.

He went on, and followed the new passage, straight now, and increasingly dim, toward the city.

XX

All around the city the growing host waited, while the sun rose higher. Under the shade of stunted trees, the leaders waited too, watching the walls and the great gate, Hurgin with set mouth and straining eyes, and Simon, cold and calm.

"We may breach the wall and enter, if need be," Hurgin said, watching the road to the east. Something large as a house moved there, coming slowly. A machine, long buried, brought forth by Hurgin's men for this task, and behind it, another and another.

"To what end?" Simon asked. "He will come forth, if he wills. Later, we may need to follow. Who knows?"

"Can you hear? Underneath . . . the sound?"

Simon nodded. "A screaming." He laughed unpleasantly. "Ah, but they are hungered." He stared at Hurgin. "Master Hurgin. How old do you think me?"

"As old as I," Hurgin said.

"Oho," Simon chuckled. "I have underestimated you, for your soft seeking of ways to heal men and defend them. You're a little farther within the mysteries than I had judged. As old as yourself, eh? And how old is that?"

"You served your master since you were a youth," Hur-

gin said. "I too was young when he left this realm. Why do you hate that one, since you and he are much the same in many ways?"

"I require the same power that he does," Simon said. "And there's no room for two of our kind. Only, I need much less in point of nourishment than he does. He has lived on men's lives for very long . . . and I feed only on such food as you do. There lies the difference."

"No," said Hurgin. "I smell your hate. And you have learned one of the great wisdoms, never to hate or be the prisoner of hating. Yet you have allowed this seed to remain, hidden within you. All the time that you served him . . . and you concealed it from him. That was great magic in itself."

Simon smiled. "It was very great magic. Had my master gained but one hint of what you see so easily . . . ah, but I allow it forth, now. Yes. Hate. And yet, great as my hate is, I have allowed another to see his end. I am almost as much a saint as you, am I not?"

Hurgin stared at him.

"Let me hazard. You have a certain cast of face, which I remember from long ago. The name Rhynel . . ."

Simon smiled, even more broadly. "True, true. I am of that blood. I am now alone. Not one of my blood lives, and you know that such as I am have no true children of our own. That was my city and my folk."

"Now, I see," Hurgin said, and was silent.

After a while, Simon, watching the wall, spoke again, almost to himself.

"I was very clever. Even when young. I sought him out, found how to attach myself to him while he sought ever deeper into wisdom . . . learned all that he knew. A long, long pursuit . . . and it draws now to an end."

There was a confused sound of shouting, nearer the great closed gate. Simon glanced that way.

"And now my late master makes his first cast. Come, master of peaceful arts, let's to our work."

The gate had swung open, and now columns of cloaked and armored men marched out, white plumed, swords out, filing into the space before the gate and forming up. More and more of them came, their blank eyes unfocused, white faces turned toward the besiegers. As they came, they fell into ranks, until masses of them stood ready, waiting.

Horsemen and ulla-riders shouted and charged, lances thrusting into the immobile ranks; and the swords went up, and down, slashing with mechanical precision. Men died, and some of the already dead guards fell. The ranks closed, as the riders fell back.

Arrow flights arched into the ranks; but this was less effective. Guards stood still, arrows bristling here and there, as if they could feel nothing . . . as indeed was true.

Khitai, who had made friends with half a dozen hill men, stood now with them, holding their mounts back as they waited. Zelza, beside him, wore the hood and carried the weapons of a hill rider herself; she would have worn anything rather than be denied the right to be in this.

"Those things cannot be killed so easily," Khitai said, biting his lip. "I wonder . . . wait, friends. I see our wizard over there. Before I play at magic with masters, I need some sort of permission." He kicked his little mount, and rode to where Simon stood watching.

"Lord wizard, give a small hedge wizard a chance to try his skills," Khitai cried out, and Simon looked up.

"Be careful, yellow man," Simon said. "I will not save you if your spell works awry."

"I would not ask rescue," Khitai said, grinning. "Have I permission?"

Simon nodded, and Khitai pulled his mount around

and rode back toward the gate and the waiting line of armored corpses.

He drew rein only yards away from their lifted points. Their dead eyes watched incuriously, as he flung his arms up at the sky, and began to chant. After a long while, he stopped, and bent low from his saddle, looking down at the ground. Then, pointing to the earth, he chanted again, a long, wailing sound, repeating a phrase endlessly, and weaving his pointing hand in a strange pattern as he did so.

Suddenly, on the ground beside him, there was a pale flicker of fire, dimmed by the sunlight, but leaping, dancing, scorching the dry grass as it burned. Khitai flung up his arms, and laughed aloud.

"I thank thee, Sky-bear, and all you who swim in the wind!" he shouted. "I have called the earth-fire out! I am truly a warlock, hai-hah!"

The flame beside him shot up, and stood, flaring and smoking . . . and it was nearly as tall as a man. Khitai's mount shivered, trying to back away; but he held the little beast firmly, as he spoke to his creation in an unknown tongue.

The fire leaped again, and seemed to dance, as he pointed to the ranked guards. And now it moved, slowly advancing.

As the fire moved, the guards moved too, stepping forward rank on rank toward the besiegers, swords up in a shining row. Lancers brought their points down, and bowmen aimed, as the ranks neared.

But the fire creature struck first. It leaped, with a curious hiss like a living thing, on to a tall guardsman's cloak, tearing at it. And as it touched, flame bloomed upward, and the dead man moved forward like a tower of fire, until he fell, a charred skeleton. But before then, the fire creature leaped again, and again, dancing and striking, and man after man in the leading rank bloomed

into fire. And not one uttered a cry, or ceased to march, until the fire burned them down to ashes. The flames ran now from man to man, and the fire creature danced in the havoc, leading the flame as it became a solid sheet. The hill men fell back a little way, only striking down an occasional smoking thing that stalked forth, red-hot sword lifted still.

And Khitai leaped up and down, roaring a cry of triumph, while Simon smiled down on all.

"They burn well, being very dry," Simon observed thoughtfully. "I did not know what small magic our yellow man had in mind, but this was very good."

"I doubt that Myrdin is finished, with only this," Hurgin said. "He will have more."

The smoke began to thin, and there were wild cheers, as it was clear that every armed corpse had burned. The fire creature faded now, and sank back, into the earth.

And then the great gate swung open again, and it became abundantly clear that Myrdin had brought forth a new and far worse tool.

The whole space of the high arch of the gateway seemed filled with a wet, slimy darkness, as though a sea of mud filled the city beyond. Then the wet stuff flowed out, in a gigantic, ropelike tentacle, toward the waiting lines of men. The nearest men fell back, with shouts of warning, the bolder of them hacking at the flowing thing with whatever weapon they had. Then it reached around in a looping circle, and gathered them in, a handful of men and animals, all together in a tumbling mass.

There was a chorus of wild shrieks, and a roar of mingled terror and rage from the nearer men, as the caught bodies were dragged back. The huge rope shape squeezed, tighter, and arched in a swing through the air, flinging crushed fragments of bloody flesh in a ghastly rain across the survivors.

Now, swiftly, the thing struck again, bunching itself

like a fist, and hammering men into the earth as though it slew flies. The bow men fell back, step by step, raining arrows which the deadly arm seemed to drink up. Lancers charged, and were ground down with their mounts to nothingness.

The thing sought, blindly, like an earthworm, sweeping back and forth, killing as it went. Simon stared at it, thoughtfully.

"It may be time to try some of your ancient mechanical arts, good Hurgin," he said. "I must admit, I cannot now think how to deal with this thing."

"Best deal with it soon, before it breaches your sorcerous wall of fire, and lets worse loose upon us all," Hurgin said. He turned to another blue-robed man. "Fetch up the wheeled wall breakers, quickly; we'll try to hurt it. " To Simon, Hurgin said, "If I knew of what material this thing is made . . ."

'Oh, as to that," Simon said. "Common flesh. Meat. The stuff of dead men, most likely, since that was there for use. Converted most cunningly into a single great brainless mass, but no different in its essence from that which we wear on our own bones." He continued to regard the questing thing thoughtfully.

The first of Hurgin's machines had now rolled up; a great, clumsy thing, mounted on toothed wheels, bearing a metal shod beak, and filled with clanking machinery that drove it with slow but resistless force.

"Remind me, if we live, good Hurgin," Simon said, regarding the thing, "I would know something of the way in which these ancient rams were driven. I think sometimes I have paid too little attention to the lesser sciences."

Hurgin waved the crew of the ram on, and the thing lumbered down upon the questing arm. It met the slimy thing, thrusting hard against the rubbery skin of it, the huge toothed wheels grinding up on the mass. For a

moment, the weight of the machine held the thing pinned; then it tore loose, and flopped wildly, striking and shoving back. The machine tilted up and rolled over with a tremendous clang.

"Waste no more machines, just yet," Simon said. "The thing is hurt, but not enough."

The rubbery arm lay quiet now, for a moment. Then, with vicious speed, it struck at the overturned machine, slamming down upon it again and again, until it was a mass of hammered metal. Then the arm moved out, longer and longer, toward a place where one of Simon's fires burned blue in a great bronze tub.

"The game goes badly," Simon observed. "I think we are in grave straits."

"If there are living Vrykol still in that city . . ." Hurgin said. "Ah! There! Your wall is broken! The basket of fire is overturned!"

"If any Vrykol still live, they will come now upon us, slaying," Simon said, nodding. "I had hoped to hold that line till all had died. Now . . . I think our only hope rests with that red-bearded one we sent against Myrdin himself."

Among the massed riders waiting beyond, a man suddenly shrieked, and pitched from his saddle. Then, another, and a third. Simon watched, under shadowed eyes.

"One Vrykol lives, at least," he said. "And there . . . a man fell there, too. More than one. Hurgin, I think we are doomed men."

XXI

In the deepening mists, Owen moved closer to the place he sought. The passage was wide now, and the light came from the same pearly fog that had filled that place he remembered. But there were no voices here now.

He reached the end of the passage, opened a small door, and stepped out.

The pale light still streamed down, out of nowhere. But the mist was gone. The whole of the garden lay before him, visible in the light.

The door through which he had come was part of a smooth wall, and he stood now on a kind of balcony, high over the enormous caverns. A stair led down to the ground level, and from this high position, he could see almost to the farther wall of the place itself. The river of his dreams led across the cave floor, silent and shining; the trees, carven images of trees, hung over its still waters. And there among the trees were the white houses. But there were no voices now. Everything was deathly still.

And there was a sharp, sweet smell, which Owen knew too well: the smell of death, like that smell which

hangs over a battlefield on the day after. He grimaced, and turned to go down.

Myrdin Velis stood, quietly waiting at the foot of the stair, looking up at him.

He seemed as young, as cool and unmoved as always; his deep eyes studied Owen without feeling, and his mouth smiled.

"Owen of Marrdale," he said. "Have you come back, then?"

Owen paused only a moment on the stair, then went on toward the wizard.

"If you don't know why I've come, you're not the warlock I thought you," Owen said, facing Myrdin. The wizard moved slowly back, seeming to drift like a cloud, still smiling. Owen came on, without lifting his crescent weapon, carrying it lightly in one hand.

"You are wise, Owen," Myrdin said. "I see you do not strike at me. Are you even more wise? Will you take what I can give you, and serve me once more?"

"What did you have in mind?" Owen asked, still moving inexorably forward. He saw, a long way off, the house he sought, and trudged toward it. Myrdin drifted slowly at his side.

"Whatever you desire," Myrdin purred. "Any fair woman in the whole world, or as many such as any man could wish. Houses of pleasure, and servitors, all you could ask. Even more . . . life forever, if you wish it."

"The pleasures of being Vrykol?" Owen asked, grimacing. "Come, good wizard, I have learned something about that."

Myrdin laughed soundlessly. "There are other ways to live long. Many ways . . . come, what do you desire?"

"That's a hard thing to say, wizard," Owen told him. "I'm a man who wants one thing today and another tomorrow, and when I've got a thing, I lose my taste for it. Now, what would you do about that, whatever?"

"Listen, Owen . . ." Myrdin moved closer. "Much, much . . . more than you can believe. Pleasure eternally fresh, joy always new . . ."

"I believe you, wizard," Owen said, and walked on.

"I will tell you of how this all came about," Myrdin whispered softly. "Listen, red-beard . . . I was once the greatest of these folk, and these were the most powerful, the wisest, the happiest of men. It was only death, and the ending of pleasures, that they feared . . . and by Vrykol, they found a way to end even that. Ordinary men are of no importance, you should know that, being no ordinary man yourself. You are a poet, and a man who dreams—"

"One or two dreams too many," Owen grunted. "And not enough poems."

"But you know how extraordinary you are. You have known mankind, and how they are but cattle. Is it wrong, that men should feed greater than men? They die, in any case . . . why should not Vrykol feed on them? They slay each other for less cause, for land they never owned, for a word or a woman . . ."

"Now, if you're trying to persuade me that men are fools, you're arguing the wrong cause, because I agree with you," Owen said. He paused, staring down a twisting path. "I do believe that's your house, is it not?"

"I shall win, red-beard," Myrdin said. "I shall win, and you will regret . . . you that could have been a god among men."

"These Vrykol are dying, wizard," Owen said, sniffing the stench in the air. "Fine godhood, that. How many of them are left now to serve you?"

"A few," Myrdin said. "Enough. You fool, you think you could survive my death? I would be revenged . . ."

"I'm constantly having to say the same thing," Owen said. "I have no choice, wizard."

"Owen."

It was Rhynel, standing in the door of a white house,

a house whose every line was familiar to Owen. Rhynel, her hair floating about her, leaning on the door and smiling at him.

"Turn aside, Owen," she murmured. "For only a moment . . . you can go on, later. All are gone, Owen . . . dead, and flown out to the world above . . . alone. I am alone . . . Owen . . ."

He stared at her, rubbing the back of his hand across his beard.

"You were really a very beautiful woman, Rhynel," he said in a level voice.

"I am more than you may possess in the upper world, in every way," she said, smiling.

"How far may you move from your grave-house now, Rhynel?" he asked her. "Your power is nearly at an end, isn't it?"

"Owen . . ." she said, her voice drawing at him. He shook his head.

"I think if I came any closer, I would have you at my life, no matter what protective law I'm under," he said, staring at her. "I think your true body lies back there, in your white house, rotting now for lack of what you need . . . and soon enough, your long life-in-death will begin. I could feel pity for you, Rhynel, if you knew what the word meant."

Her face was changing strangely as he watched. A moldering, a flaking . . . he turned away, hearing the voice behind him.

The voice wailed, in wordless agony, and then faded, down into silence. Before Owen, the path turned and led now to the door of Myrdin's house.

And into the path, facing him, stepped Khitai, with Zelza at his side. Owen stopped, staring at them.

"Owen," Khitai said, smiling thinly. "Wait."

"We've both given our lord Myrdin our service," Zelza said, smiling too. "There's no more need for what you came to do. All's over."

"Above, the wizard has defeated all the hosts who came against him," Khitai said. "So now, we're fortunate in this much . . . he rewards our earlier service. Come, we'll turn back."

Owen studied the yellow man's face for a long moment; then his eyes switched to Zelza's face, and remained there awhile. Then, grim-faced, he nodded.

"Luka give me skill," he said, and swung the ax in a lunging sweep. Khitai flung up an arm with a wild shriek, and the blade sheared through; a sheet of blood fountained up.

As Khitai fell, Zelza hurled herself at Owen, a dagger glinting in her hand, and he dodged, and swung again. The ax slid nearly through her neck, and she crumpled.

He reeled back gagging, cold horror clamping down upon his heart, as he stared at the bodies in the path.

It was a trick of Myrdin's. It had to be a trick.

"I've done what I had to, wizard," he shouted toward the house door. "Trick or not . . ."

But the two broken bodies did not fade away; the blood dried darkly in thick pools on the path. Owen went forward, staggering a little, into the door and toward the green, glowing pillar on which sat the skull of Myrdin Velis.

It was a long, long walk.

The wind pressed harder against him, as he pushed on; a cold wind, growing colder. Snow swirled, and he sank in drifts of it. Far away, on an inaccessible hill of ice, the green pillar glowed. If he stopped, he could be warm . . . but he did not stop.

The sun was beating down, now, and he walked on broken stones that radiated heat; blinking sun, and somewhere, off behind him, a well of cold water.

Sweat poured from him, as he took another step that was like a hundred steps for effort.

"Come now, wizard," Owen howled, against the wailing hot wind. "What use are these games, now?"

And suddenly, it was pitch-dark.

A face floated by, eyes blindly staring toward him . . . his father's face. Near it, another face, and another. Voices, out of his memories, came, but weirdly changed.

"Lost, lost and dead . . ." his father said. "Under ground, and dead, forgetting . . ."

"Life, blown out like a candle, and all things good gone with it . . . it is very evil to die . . ."

But beyond, in the awful dark, a green spark.

He found the base of the pillar blindly with his hand, and at once the light returned.

The room was shadowy and quiet. There were no more visions. Only the skull remained, regarding him quietly through jeweled eyes that flickered faintly.

He stood, balancing the ax, regarding it.

"I am a reasonable man, Owen of Marrdale," the skull said quietly.

"Are you?" Owen asked, pausing.

"I saw this," it said. "A shadow. I have won against such matters before. It seemed reasonable to play the game once more." It regarded him, and the eyes glowed on.

"I quite understand," Owen said. "But you'll see reason in what I do, too, then."

"I tried to buy you," the skull said. "I would have given everything I promised. Remember that, if you feel later that you might have chosen otherwise. I know now that you have won, and I find it rather humorous. A small, red barbarian, to destroy the work of so long a time, and so ancient an idea."

"It does seem unfair," Owen agreed. He cocked his head, balancing the ax for the right line of blow. "On the other hand, there's nothing to be done about it. I'm glad you're taking it so well, though."

"You underestimate my detachment," the skull said. "But one thing . . . I must not leave you quite unscarred.

I can give you this. When you grow old, with only half the things you would have done even begun . . ."

"I don't like this line you're taking," Owen said, and swung back the ax.

". . . hair and teeth gone, and no woman much use to you, with a son waiting to sell off the land you leave him . . ."

"Good enough," Owen said, and the ax struck the green pillar with a thunderous crash. A great crack appeared, and the pillar disintegrated into a pile of glassy shards. The skull rolled off, and came to a stop a yard away.

". . . thinking of the grave, and remembering how once, and only once, you could have been much more than you are. Old men care less for honor and for oaths than for a few more days of life . . . and you will beg then for one day of youth . . . when you could have had an eternity of it . . ."

"Talking bones," Owen said as the room seemed to tilt around him. He brought the ax forward over his shoulder, in a tremendous downward swing. The blade sheared down, and the skull broke into a dozen pieces, while the ax sank inches into the floor. And under the blade, pinned, lay something small and gray and horrible, that bled, squealing . . . and died.

"Talking," Owen said, drunkenly. He felt very queer indeed. He tried to wrench the blade from the floor, and the crescent snapped, leaving half the metal still imbedded. He stared at the useless shaft, and dropped it.

"A good ax," he muttered. "Good axes, good friends . . . gone. Luka, what's the matter with me?"

He walked, unsteadily, to the door, and out. The bodies no longer lay in the path, and Owen was grateful for that much.

"Ah." He started for the stair by which he had entered, trying to breathe against what seemed to be thickening

air. He realized that he was being somehow poisoned, whether by the evil vapors of the place, or by some deliberate action of the warlock, he did not know. But he made a gigantic effort of will, and somehow, he was able to move.

The cold water spraying in his face helped; his mind began to clear.

Cold water?

His feet were wet, too. Blearily, he stared at the stair down which he had come. Out of the door, a solid jet of green water poured, and sheets of water were moving now across the cavern floor. The spray that had struck his face . . . he licked his beard. Salt!

The sea was pouring in. The folk of the sea had taken no chances on their enemies' escape. He remembered the valve in the room above, and grinned, wryly.

"This place needs cleaning," he said aloud, watching the water wash against his ankles. "And the blood on me . . . maybe that'll wash, too."

The deadly arm died, suddenly. It dissolved into a slimy pool, and sank into the dry earth. But death had been sown all along the invaders' line, both by the protean arm and by the invisible, hungry Vrykols. It was impossible to tell how many of them there were, but men died, steadily.

Then, just as the arm died, a great cloud of black smoke shot up from a dozen places within the city. The earth shook, as if tapped like an enormous drum. And invisibly, voices cried out in wailing screams; the Vrykols knew first what had happened.

A horseman came, riding hard from the shore, a hill man, who flung himself from his mount before Simon and Hurgin, gasping for breath.

"Sea-riders!" he choked. "Called out . . . told us, on shore . . . tell you the demon below . . . dead. They

. . . opened the sea! Sea . . . flood. Said you'd know . . . why."

Simon nodded. "We have won."

Hurgin stared at him. "That outlander red-beard. He'll be drowned, then."

"Of course." Simon said calmly. "Unless he has the wit to find his way out through the temple. Even so, he may have been slain in some way himself. Myrdin could not have forgone a few traps, left even after his death."

"But man, he . . . he alone, did this!" Hurgin exploded. "Can we do nothing for him?"

"Gratitude is not a truly rational thing, good brother in wisdom," Simon said. "The matter is of no further concern to me. Nor aught else, here. Go then, with your skin-wearing servants, and see what you may find to loot in that dead city. I have matters of concern to me to attend to." He turned, his cloak whirling about him, and walked, incredibly fast, down . . . down a sloped path that seemed to go in an impossible direction. He grew smaller, and vanished.

Hurgin stared, dizzily, at the place where he had been. He knew of such matters, but it was not a kind of magic he cared to use. He shook his head, and shouted for his aides.

"The city is open," he said. "Tell them all . . . beware, there may still be traps, or devilish war engines loose . . . but we must reach the temple ourselves. We must try to bring out that red-bearded man. Let the hill men loot, but gather riders to help us in this. Come, quickly."

But it was Zelza who reached the temple first, alone, riding a small black horse she had caught. Swiftly, she spurred the beast up the long steps, and into the shadowed dome, and flung herself down, before the raised plat-

form. The whole place seemed to be shaking with a queer humming, as though something were breathing far below.

Then she saw the great metal cover, lowered into place over the well, and knew what was below from a description, though she had never seen it before. The cover was down . . . and the way out was barred, while the sea rose below.

She hammered at the thing with a sword hilt, gasping curses in her Rom language; but it was futile hammering, for the cover was a solid piece of metal. And then she saw the chain, and the great pulley that it hung from. She leaped to it, and began to pull.

Inch by inch, the cover rose, higher and higher . . . and swung away. Below, only a few feet beneath the rim, black sea water bubbled . . .

. . . Owen sat on the topmost step, up to his waist in the water; and in the light from above, he looked up, and grinned unsteadily.

"I wondered how long it would take you to see the chain," he said, and climbed up and out.

Holding her, he shook his head. "I killed you."

"I feel alive enough," she said.

"Killed him, too." He stared over her shoulder at Khitai, who had come through the temple door at a dead run.

"He probably deserved it," she said.

"Luka's teeth!" He stepped back and stared at her, holding her at arm's length. Finally, he laughed, a wild, echoing laugh that boomed up into the hollow dome overhead.

"We'll buy a cart!" he said, pulling her back to him. "And what color would you like it, Rom wench?"

BEYOND THE KNOWN LANDS . . .

. . . lay terror. It was strange country, that across the western seas, and sensible men would avoid it as though the waters of the seas themselves were bearers of the plague.

But Owen of Marrdale was not an ordinary man . . . nor even an ordinary thief, though he made his living through the art of stealing. Still, he once made the mistake of saving his life by accepting the favor of a sorcerer . . . and the favors of such do not come cheap. The price is always high, and frequently higher than a man can properly afford to pay. But when in debt to a sorcerer, the debt must be discharged . . . no matter what elements of hell are released along the way!

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